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Tyndale University College & Seminary

Improving Our Welcome:
Listening and Responding to Newcomers in Order to
Improve the Hospitality of Weyburn Free Methodist Church

A Thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Doctor of Ministry
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by
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ABSTRACT

This action research project used interviews to gain insight into the experience of newcomers to a rural church, used group discernment techniques to generate a response, and then evaluated the process and outcomes with developmental evaluation in order to recommend ongoing adjustments to the congregation and leadership.

Fourteen people who first encountered the programs and people of Weyburn Free Methodist Church (WFMC) after 2009 were chosen by the research team and interviewed. After group discernment meetings analyzed the content of the interviews, the research team recommended that a Welcome: Connect team be implemented in the church foyer on Sunday mornings, monitored by ongoing developmental evaluation. After eight months, follow-up interviews with four of the initial subjects and six newcomers who came to WFMC during the study were used, alongside church statistics, to detect any changes.

Improvements were observed in newcomer connection, congregational attitudes of hospitality, intentionality of the research team, and leadership competencies.

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This thesis is dedicated to my father Len Mowchenko who taught me the value of an outsider's perspective. I love you Dad, and miss you more each day.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAS:	Complex Adaptive System
FMCiC:	The Free Methodist Church in Canada. The denomination that WFMC is affiliated with.
NCD:	Natural Church Development
NIV:	The New International Version Bible. Unless otherwise indicated all Bible quotations in this paper are from NIV (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973).
WFMC:	Weyburn Free Methodist Church. The local church where the action research project took place.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

This project sought to generate an informed response to the experiences of newcomers to Weyburn Free Methodist Church (WFMC). Listening to and evaluating first-hand accounts of newcomers' experiences with WFMC revealed clear patterns in who is attracted to our church, how they get involved, and why they eventually choose to become an enduring part of the WFMC church family. An intentional response to these patterns revealed the strengths of our church family, the limitations of what a congregation can do, the ripple effect of the actions of a small but motivated group of people, and the value of listening attentively. The results were both more and less than we expected, as this project also resulted in personal leadership paradigm revolution.

Personal Leadership Journey

I, Jay Mowchenko, am currently 45 years old and have been in ministry with the Free Methodist Church in Canada (FMCiC) since 1993. I have served as a youth pastor, an intern, an assistant pastor, and a church planter. I have been lead pastor at WFMC since May 1, 2006. I was the lead action researcher in this project.

As I have worked in various leadership positions in the church, I have felt that my calling has been to be an agent of God's peace and blessing in the world. I

have sought to add value to whatever person I encounter and whatever organization I have been a part of. I have found that people from both inside and outside the church seem to sense that desire and so come to me for help on a regular basis. As I have served people from outside the church, they have often come to faith in Christ through our relationship, and this is where the frustration usually begins. When those people then attempt to seek to grow in their new life in Christ by coming to church services where I am leading, they often find it difficult to engage with the community of faith, sometimes giving up and walking away from the good work that God had begun in them. The frustration I have felt as a witness to this process has led me to agonize about the questions of church growth and newcomer retention.

Something that has emerged in the process of this study is that my affinity with and passion for people outside the Church springs largely from the relationship my father had with me and with the Church. My father had severed his relationship with the Church in his college years, and yet retained the values and lifestyle that he had been raised with. Growing up, I prayed for his salvation every day. In 2007, the year prior to his diagnosis with colon cancer, Dad became significantly more interested in my ministry, and something changed. I'm not sure what that something was, but he was different. I felt that he was moving towards a faith expression similar to my own. I observed that he was more open to talking about faith, he listened to my sermons on the radio, and occasionally came to visit the church I led. He seemed to be moving towards a reconciliation, not only with God, but also with the Church. It is one of my great regrets in life that he never

explicitly reconciled with Christ or His Church before his death, nor did he ever express a desire to become part of the church. I realize now that my father's faith journey has profoundly biased the focus and passion of my ministry towards the lost sheep, favouring leaving the ninety-nine in order to seek the one (Matthew 18:12-14). This is the bias that I bring to this project, and the passion that drives the questions we are asking.

Congregational Context

The Weyburn Free Methodist Church is a 114-year-old congregation with an average of two hundred and twenty-five people attending weekend services. It is located in Weyburn, Saskatchewan.

Until 2006, Weyburn was a small city at the crossroads of several highways. In 2006, the population was 9,962 people and the majority of the industry was agriculture-based. However, by 2011 the combination of a change of government, high oil prices and several new oil drilling technologies (fracking and horizontal drilling) had made it feasible to develop the Bakken oilfield, which extends south from southeastern Saskatchewan into North Dakota and Montana:

According to Cenovus's estimates, the Bakken Oil Play contains approximately 1.4 billion barrels of oil, making it one of the largest medium - sour crude oil sites in Canada, and it is producing an estimated 15,000 barrels of oil per day. The Bakken Oil Play has produced for 50 years and new technologies are expanding possibilities for more efficient extraction methods, meaning the Bakken Play could produce for decades more. (Sask. Housing and Urban Dev. Council 2011)

The consequences for the City of Weyburn over the intervening years have been significant: The population has increased from 9,962 in 2006 to 11,782 in 2011 –

an increase of 18%. Projections have placed Weyburn's potential population at anywhere between 16,000 and 26,000 people by 2025.

The impact of population growth is most clearly shown in the increase of housing prices:

The average home price over the 20 year period ranged from \$47,926 in 1984 to \$85,436 in 2004..., an increase of 78 percent...Comparatively, housing purchased close to the average price in 2004 could potentially be sold today for close to \$220,000, the current average sale price. (Sask. Housing and Urban Dev. Council 2011)

The census data provided by Statistics Canada seems to indicate a steady immigrant population for Weyburn, with a slight decline from 1996 to 2011 (Statistics Canada 2014, 2011). However, my personal experience and anecdotal evidence from others would seem to indicate that the service, hospitality, healthcare and construction industries are all intentionally seeking to recruit immigrants in order to fill positions. There seem to be an increasing number of people from visible minorities, and more people with English as a second or third language living and working in Weyburn.

Church History

WFMC is part of the Free Methodist Church in Canada (FMCiC) and was planted in 1911 by R.H. Hamilton, who moved from his church in Estevan, to begin the new work:

The summer of 1910 brought a move to Weyburn – no church, no members, no parsonage and a young family to support... That winter in -24 to -40 degree weather he and two men from Estevan built a small tabernacle called 'Bethel Mission.' By the summer of 1911, Weyburn had 17 members. (Robinson 2000)

From this initial beachhead, a revival south of Weyburn led to the establishment of a second preaching point, called Riverview. In 1918, another preaching point was added east of Weyburn, in Hume, due to the work of R.H. Hamilton (who was then conference superintendent) and Rev F.M. Wiess. Many other preaching points were initiated and then abandoned over the years, but those three remained stable (Vatamanuick 2000).

In the late 1950's, the outlying preaching points (Riverview and Hume) chose to close and merge with Weyburn in order to ensure the continued viability of the original Weyburn church. Soon after the arrival of Rev. Keith Taylor in 1963, it was decided that the building on 5th Street was too small for the newly revitalized congregation. A new site was purchased and a new building built in 1965 on the present site on the corner of 14th Street NE and Coteau Ave. There followed a second period of stability until Rev. Wade Fitzpatrick was assigned to WFMC in 1990 (Liddle 2000).

Beginning in 1993, the church leadership again began to observe that the worship services were filling the sanctuary to capacity. Several studies were undertaken in this period, including the Natural Church Development (NCD) survey, a community church survey, and a phone survey of the needs/desires of the community as it related to religious issues. Several dramatic changes were made in response to the results of this analysis of the church and community: hiring a youth pastor, changing the worship style, changing the preaching style to be more relevant and applicable, building a greeters ministry, and revamping the children's ministry.

While many churches made such changes in this decade, WFMC experienced the miracle that most could only hope for: the church grew (see Figure 1), conversions were celebrated weekly, a building project was completed and paid for in three years. This addition was filled up as well, precipitating the beginning of a second service on Sunday mornings.

Based on the anecdotal evidence I have gathered, it is my opinion that there were a couple of factors that enhanced WFMC's ability to attract and receive new people. First, the innovative changes they made coincided with the closure of several small churches in communities within thirty minutes driving time to Weyburn. As a result, several highly engaged, mature Christian families with young children joined WFMC at just the right time to staff the newly re-imagined Children and Youth programs. This also added to the momentum that came from having new people arrive which created significant buzz in the community. Secondly, WFMC was the only church in the community that made an effort at producing a contemporary worship service with drums and guitars. This allowed it to be the first stop for any Christians who moved into the area. Third, Pastor Wade was a gifted evangelist who also had a knack for keeping things simple. In this context, Wade's focus on the simple gospel allowed people from many different denominations to feel comfortable engaging in the generic evangelicalism of the church, based on an adaptation/combination of Rick Warren's Saddleback and Bill Hybels' Willow Creek church styles.

In 2003, Pastor Wade announced his resignation and moved to Moose Jaw in April of 2004. The leadership of WFMC, out of a desire to see the momentum

of the previous decades continue, quickly hired John Enns-Wynd, a recent grad from Briercreech Bible College. He was hired almost immediately after Wade's 16-year tenure came to a close. While accounts vary as to why he was let go only six months after being hired, the end result of John's transition seems to have been a divided, confused and significantly humbled church family. In 2005, Rev. Dennis Camplin was engaged to walk WFMC through an intentional interim period in order to bring healing and prepare the church for a more unified and healthy future. He made some very dramatic and sweeping changes to the governance structure of the church, to better support the larger size and complexity of the church.

On May 6, 2006, the search committee offered me the position of Lead Pastor of WFMC, and I accepted, moving to Weyburn with my wife and two young children. This was a significant risk for a church of this size and complexity, since I had only six years of experience in a lead position as pastor. Most of my previous pastoral experience had been as a pastoral staff member until my wife and I planted the FreeWay Free Methodist Church in 2000. At the time of being hired at WFMC, The FreeWay was still under 100 people in attendance. The WFMC hiring team had no evidence of my ability to lead a staff team or navigate complex issues of church management. I am grateful they took such a risk. Upon arriving, my personal desire coincided with the desire of the leadership of the church: recapture fading momentum and continue to expand this thriving ministry. Over my tenure here, we have made significant use of the strategic planning and church health tools endorsed and made available by our

denomination, such as NCD, Lifeplan (a strategic planning tool created by the FMCiC), as well as StatsCan and Outreach Canada demographic research tools. As will become clear in the following paragraphs, WFMC continues to be a church with significant strengths, and has ministry reach into the community in several ways. However, the dream of recaptured momentum and expansion still remains tantalizingly out of reach.

SWOT Evaluation of Church Health

The overall health of WFMC in 2015, prior to the beginning of the study, is as follows. This analysis is a summary of numerous regular evaluations that are conducted with the Board of Directors and pastoral staff team each year.

Strengths

Unified, informed and engaged core leadership teams: Our board of directors and pastoral staff teams are strongly and publicly supportive of the vision, ministry methods & structural philosophy that we are following as we pursue continued growth.

Financial stability: In the past ten years, annual giving has grown from \$300,000 to almost \$500,000. WFMC also has significant reserves, often keeping six months of our annual budget ready to cover ministry expenses. Givers respond quickly and generously to families in need. We have a consistent habit of tithing to our denomination, and give over twenty percent of our budget to missions.

An abundance of musical talent: WFMC currently has four worship teams that provide a high quality, sincere contemporary worship experience for our

morning services.

Multiple preachers of high caliber: We consistently receive glowing reviews regarding all of the speakers that share the pulpit on Sunday mornings.

Passionate, responsive missions team: Over the past 8 years, our missions team has evolved from a small church that sends money and prays to a ministry that annually sends two missions teams overseas, supports short term trips, has significant partnerships with regional, national and overseas organizations and is intentionally building a full menu of ministries with the goal that every person in WFMC has an option to get involved with something they are passionate about. This is in line with their vision to accomplish the WFMC vision that “Everyone knows Jesus personally” by empowering the people of WFMC with the slogan: “Everyone a missionary. Every Day. Everywhere.”

Multiplying groups of evangelistic men: In the past few years, I have had the privilege of leading several men to Christ. As business owners and entrepreneurs, these men have relational threads throughout the city and have been successful in starting men’s groups. These groups are very active, starting other ministries as they come up with ideas about how to help people in the community. In addition to that, I began a Radical Mentoring (www.radicalmentoring.com) program in 2014 with four men that transformed them into leaders and mentors that are having an ever-increasing effect on the health of our church.

Community engagement: The WFMC people have a long history of

volunteering in the community and participating in community events. Currently, our members are actively involved in the Rotary, Chamber of Commerce, Cancer Society and Habitat for Humanity. We have a history of using our music ministry to perform Southern Gospel concerts that have generated much goodwill. Our pastoral staff team are building on that reputation through our involvement in school groups, coaching sports teams, nursing home services, chaplaincy and other community projects.

Long-term multigenerational loyalty: The core families of WFMC have elders who were present shortly after the founding of the church. The elders still alive in the church are in their 90's and can tell stories stretching back to the 1930's. These seniors have seen a lot of change in their church, and they have a lot of love for their grandchildren and great grandchildren. They were willing to sacrifice their worship preferences in the 90's because they were convinced that the new programs and new style of worship would reach the next generation for Christ. WFMC is truly multigenerational, with an almost even distribution across the age spectrum. The loyalty and openness of our elders through the 1990's has released the capacity to build strength at the other end of the age spectrum.

Ministry to families: The community surveys WFMC took in the 90's showed them that children and youth programs were a major concern of Weyburn people. They made the decision to invest in hiring a youth pastor, and then in 2007, a children's pastor. These staff investments have combined with a congregational openness to encourage children and youth in their spiritual development. A snapshot of our church services on a typical Sunday would reveal

20+ children under two, 40-50 elementary school-aged children, and 20+ high school teens. A significant portion of our Sunday service attenders is under 18 years of age.

Weaknesses

Lack of conversions and baptisms: The greatest concern for all of us at WFMC is not actually the attendance figures, but the lack of conversions and baptisms. In the 90's, there were accounts of conversions almost weekly, and many baptismal services. In the ten years from 2006 – 2016, the number of conversions and baptisms in our church has remained consistently under ten per year.

Success addiction: What was once a strength has become a weakness. Because the ministry changes that were implemented in the Miracle 90's were so effective, the people who led and experienced these changes are now understandably very attached to those methods and are extremely reluctant to consider any changes to the successful formula. Experimentation with worship styles receives quick and sharp criticism; as youth ministry has evolved to become more mission and service focused, parents and onlookers alike have criticized the program for not being enough fun; leaders in children's ministry seem to perpetually burn out trying to keep up the required energy and staffing levels; finally, as the number of conversions decline, questions are raised about the competency of the current leadership. Rainer describes a church in a similar situation that was unwilling to wrestle deeply with the consequences of this

mindset and this story should be a cautionary tale for our church as we look ahead into the future (Rainer 2010, 79, 80)

Oilfield resistance: An oil boom has brought an infusion of wealth and business, combined with the accompanying surge of new people coming to work and settling down here. These have all combined to create a sense of anxiety and defensiveness in those who live here. The very people who allowed, embraced and moved forward with the changes of the previous decades are now struggling to accept any further study, change or expansion of the WFMC ministry, because they are also fighting to maintain their sense of identity as a city. These people are suspicious of the oil industry and are very concerned about the aftereffects once the oil runs out. “Weyburn just needs to hang in there, and when the oil field runs out, things can go back to the way they were,” is a commonly expressed sentiment from this group of people.

Intercultural inexperience: As our church has grown beyond a single service, many people within WFMC comment on how hard it is to do more than shake peoples’ hands on Sunday morning. They say that they go to greet a newcomer, only to find that this person has been coming for several years. This has inhibited our traditional ways of making friends through inviting new people out for coffee or to our house for a meal. Now that the cultural make-up of our community is also changing, our people instinctively know that the traditional Prairie ways of making people feel welcome (shaking their hand, smiling, inviting someone out for coffee or over for dinner), aren’t quite what the newcomers to Weyburn are expecting. Additionally, the pastoral staff team is finding it difficult

to engage people from different cultures in the regular flow of our ministry recruitment practices. Despite having the desire to welcome those who are different from us, we seem to lack the tools and experience to do this successfully.

Opportunities

TV, radio and internet ministry: In 2005, WFMC began broadcasting Sunday services live at 11 am on AM1190, the local AM station, and taped services on ACCESS channel 7, the local cable station, several times a week. Church leaders regularly receive email and verbal affirmation that people are watching and listening in Weyburn and in communities as far away as Cochrane, AB, Bismark, ND, and Brandon MB. We have been told that these ministries provide an opportunity to window shop and get to know what we are like as a church before they make that significant step of showing up in person. Now that AM1190 streams their broadcasts online and we have begun posting our sermons on our website, our ministry impact can expand even further.

Community reputation: Our quality worship music, youth and children's programs, coupled with the visibility that our radio and TV presence gives us has made our church well known and well-liked in Weyburn.

New people: Not only are new people moving to the community of Weyburn, they are coming to our church. We have, on average, 5-10 first-time visitors each week to our weekend services. These people are a mix of long-standing Weyburn residents, oilfield workers and new Canadians.

Untapped entrepreneurial and ministry potential: There are many

uninvolved people who call our church home who have significant creative and entrepreneurial gifts. The strengths in ministry programming have led many new people to conclude that they are not needed here and so they settle in to simply consuming ministry services instead of seeking ways to get involved. These people represent significant potential for the future.

Giving capacity: WPMC has a deep sense of compassion and is very responsive to purposeful compassionate giving.

Threats

Circling the wagons: It is my opinion that Weyburn folks feel under significant stress from all the changes that the new people are creating by moving into the community. In conversations with leaders in the City of Weyburn (the Mayor, Police Chief, former Fire Chief and other pastors), they have indicated that they agree with this assessment. The increasing price of housing, increasing traffic both in town and on the highways, hospitality workers whose first language is not English, and changing strategies of civic leaders are all factors that cause long-term residents to be resistant to proposed changes of any kind, especially in the church. This creates a climate that is closed to newcomers doing anything more than just attending and receiving from services and ministries.

Missing the wave: A personal fear of mine is that if we are unable to break through into new areas of ministry and impact, we will settle into a comfortable rut and God will choose another church to meet the emerging needs of our city. As Figure 1 reveals, the first three and a half years of my tenure (2006-2009)

seemed to stave off decline, and even produced a modest increase. However, since 2009, there has been a steady decline in numbers of attenders. This statistic is cause for concern; however, it must be considered in the balanced context of ministry health at WFMC.

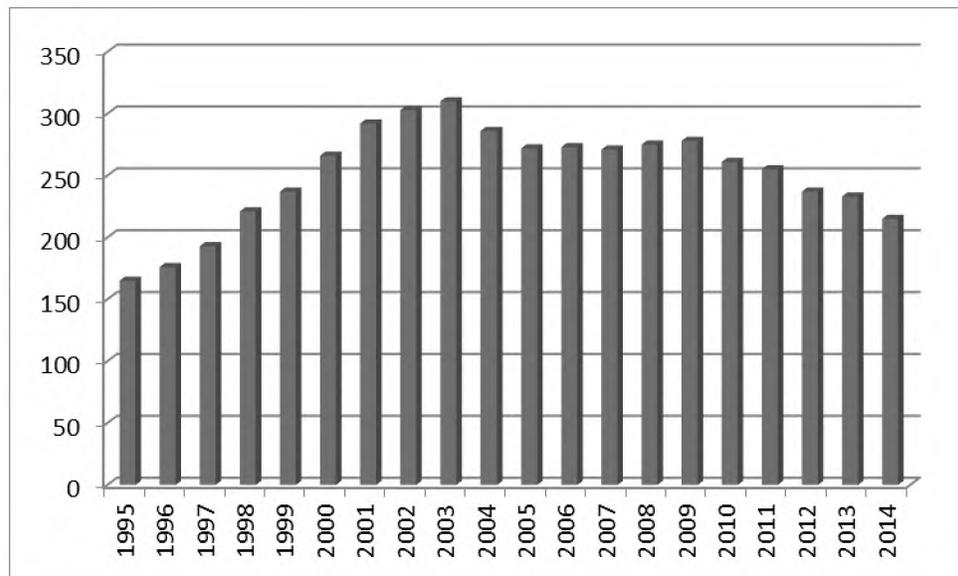


Figure 1. WFMC Annual Average Sunday Morning Attendance

SWOT Conclusions

When I began ministry in Weyburn in 2006, my intention was that we return to the pattern of attendance growth and weekly conversions that were the past experience of this church. WFMC shows many signs of being a healthy, vibrant church, with many opportunities on the horizon. However, the lack of correlation between the number of visitors and growth in our weekend attendance raises important questions. While our statistics indicate that we have over one hundred first-time local visitors each year in our services, our weekly attendance is declining slightly. The pastoral staff considered several possibilities that could

be causing this dynamic: loss of existing members, less frequent attendance patterns, and failure of newcomers to connect. The first possibility was of greatest concern. However, we have a very specific attendance tracking process that tracks the patterns of each family such that the pastoral staff are aware of when families stop attending. The numbers of people moving away or changing churches was not sufficient to account for the attendance change. There is a growing pattern of infrequent attendance that we observe in our church families that could account for some of the drop in average attendance figures. Our thought was that if we could uncover what made it difficult for new people to connect, we might also understand what causes people to attend less frequently. As we turned our attention to newcomers, the overwhelming testimony from these people is that their first impression of the people, music and sermons are all positive.

Discussions about this dynamic led our pastoral staff to look deeper into the attendance and involvement patterns of newcomers. We identified something that seems to happen at the six to eight month mark as people get to know our church. Initially, visitors to our weekend services have a good impression of our church, but over six to eight months of fairly regular attendance, their attendance pattern drops off to either one or two times per year, or almost never. These people continue to report that WPMC is their church, and will turn to us in times of crisis, but they don't exhibit further engagement in the ministries of our church, such as small groups or ministry teams. We have taken to calling this dynamic "The Wall."

Defining the Research Question

The population of the city of Weyburn increased eighteen percent between 2006 and 2011 (Statistics Canada 2013). WFMC internal statistics indicate that we have over one hundred first-time local visitors each year in their Sunday services. However, the annual average attendance of WFMC declined in the same period from 275 to 241, a drop of twelve percent. WFMC has new people coming in but their weekly attendance continues to decline. Therefore, the research question that this study seeks to answer is: “What is the experience of newcomers to WMFC and how can we improve the way we welcome them into active fellowship?”

Definition of Key Term

Despite the common use of the term “newcomers” to refer to someone who is new to Canada, we are using this term in a different sense. For the purposes of this study, the broad term “newcomers” will refer to people who have encountered WFMC through the weekend worship services for the first time since 2009. Once they have crossed the threshold of the building for the first time, they are considered a “newcomer,” regardless of other ways this term may or may not apply to them.

Supervision, Permissions and Access

This project was undertaken with the full approval of the WFMC Board of Directors, and WFMC staff gave full access to all information necessary. As Lead Pastor, I was able to facilitate the research project in such a way as to be

responsive to the needs of the individuals involved and the congregation as a whole.

Expectations

Through listening to the reflective feedback of people with different behavioural responses to the ministry and people of WFMC, the research team hoped to find information that could lead to a shift in programming and attitude within the church that would improve how newcomers are welcomed.

The evidence of success the team hoped for was increased attendance frequency among newcomers, an increase in the frequency of newcomers becoming part of small groups, an increase in the overall numbers of small groups and people in them, increased participation in ministry teams, as well as testimony from the return interviews that their perception of and engagement with WFMC has improved.

Conclusion and Implications

In this study, we were led to a greater appreciation of the spiritual depth and awareness that newcomers bring with them to their first encounter with our church. We learned that newcomers have given more thought to their spiritual choices and approached church as more informed participants than we had expected. The speed and depth of their participation in our church family life had more to do with their existing lifestyle and their reasons for coming to church than it had to do with the response of the church to them. The interviews helped participants reflect more deeply on their spiritual journey, while also facilitating a

relational connection between interviewer and interviewee. Despite the effect that the limitations newcomers brought with them to church had on their eventual level of engagement, the Welcome: Connect ministry did encourage easier and quicker participation in WFMC ministries beyond the Sunday service for those that wanted and were able to, while also raising awareness of the importance of hospitality within the congregation. We also learned that intentional hospitality requires significant and ongoing investment to maintain. These findings are described more fully in chapter five.

Our team approach to action research and the group discernment sessions which led to new ministry initiatives were object lessons in leading emergent change in a complex adaptive organization. As a leader, these experiences led me to understand that the process of bringing positive change to a church is not a linear process, but rather involves an interaction of self-awareness and contextual awareness that leads to planting seeds of change in fertile places and then nurturing those that grow. This process of leading change is described in chapter six.

CHAPTER TWO: THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

This study is focused on understanding the experience of new people as they encounter a specific local church family so that the church may be better equipped to welcome them. In this chapter, I will uncover the theological foundation that guides our church in responding to new people. I will take three cycles through the overall witness of Scripture, with ever-deepening levels of understanding that reflect the progress of my own journey. First of all, I will explore the idea of growth in Scripture and seek a balanced perspective on church growth and size, wrestling specifically with the Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14-30). Next, I will seek the purpose of gathering people into communities of faith by walking through the development of the Biblical themes of expansion, inclusion and reconciliation. This will uncover the heart of God towards strangers, especially in the book of Hosea and in Ezekiel 16. Finally, I will discuss the meaning of hospitality, finding its focus in the account of the Sheep and Goats (Matt. 25:31-46). I will conclude by considering the cost and stakes of hospitality. This chapter will show that God is concerned about more than numerical increase in church size, instead what God desires is that individual followers of Christ and church communities would have an open-hearted love towards strangers, guests,

outsiders, newcomers, visitors or as Miroslav Volf calls them "the other" (Volf 1996).

The Growth Question

The impetus for this project began with a desire for WFMC to grow numerically. As I looked at the various indicators of health and vitality of our church, there seemed to be many that made our church look good: lots of ministry activities, financial solvency, a young demographic, weekend services that were large enough to feel successful, lots of visitors and a good reputation in the community. However, the numbers of people involved seemed to be static, and at times the numbers seemed in slight decline. This raised concerns in my heart and mind, and so I began by asking the growth question: "Why is our church not growing?"

On the surface, this seems to be the relevant question to ask. One could certainly argue that God has an appetite for expansion and growth. In the Garden, His mandate to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28 is to "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it." An increase in the size of both family and territory is recognized throughout the Old Testament as a sign of God's blessing as can be seen in Genesis 17:20, 24:60, 26:24, 48:16, Deuteronomy 1:11, 7:13, 30:16 and Psalm 107:38.

Jesus links fruitfulness and faithfulness a number of times. In the parable of the soils, He says that seed that falls in good soil not only increases, but it multiplies (Matt. 13:23). The parable of the Talents shows the King rewarding

those who increase His wealth, while punishing the wicked servant who failed to do so (Matt. 25:14-30). Jesus challenges the disciples to see that the harvest could be abundant if only they had the eyes to see it, and challenged them to pray for workers with the implication that if people would just go out into the fields and work, the harvest would be abundant (Matt. 9:35-38).

In addition, it seems that counting and keeping track of the number of people matters. God's promises to Abraham included a promise to increase the number of his descendants. The tracking of the size of the nation of Israel in the book of Numbers seems to show that the number of people is important enough to God that the writers of Scripture recorded them (Num. 1-3). The beginning of the church as described in Acts seems to indicate that the counting of people and celebrating an increase in numbers is a good thing. Not only was the initial and ongoing addition of people a cause for celebration, but the number of people was actually recorded in Acts 2:41.

Even though increase is a desirable result, it is not a mandate for every church at all times. I previously referred to the parable of the talents as an example of how God views faithful stewardship of responsibilities. In this parable, we see a wealthy master entrusting his three servants with varying amounts of money before he leaves on a long journey. Upon his return, each of the servants gives an account of what he has done with the master's money. Two of the servants doubled the money that was given to them, and the master is pleased. The final servant begins his report with an attack on his master's character before going on to report on the results of his efforts: "I knew that you

are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you” (Matt 25:24, 35). The master is angry and punishes the final servant.

In this story, we see three servants given differing amounts of monetary responsibility, but the implied expectation for them all is increase. Where there is lack of clarity is in the final judgment of the lazy servant - as to whether he is punished for his laziness, or his lack of increase. The king's judgment of the servant seems to be focused more on the servant's overall attitude, which then led to the inevitable failure to increase. A question that Jesus leaves unanswered in this parable is what the king's response would be to an unfruitful but faithful servant. The passage could have read, "And the servant that he had given three talents to came to him and said, 'Master, I did my best. I put your talents to work but the ground was hard and crops failed this year. I have nothing to show for my efforts. I failed you.'" We are left uncertain as to what the would king say. He might say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant! You worked hard with the talents I gave you. You risked what you had, knowing my heart and yet you did not see the results you hoped for. Come and share in your master's happiness. Give to this servant three cities, for I care not about results, but about your heart and your faithfulness in service." However there is the real possibility that God could say, "You foolish and lazy servant! Had you asked for my wisdom and guidance and not given up, you would have seen an increase. Because you settled for lack of results and did not use all of the resources I gave you, you wasted

valuable opportunities. Cast him out into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." The fact that Jesus did not clarify this either way weakens any unequivocal claim that God values either faithfulness or fruitfulness exclusively.

While some of the Scripture passages above would seem to indicate that increasing in size and influence can be seen as progressing towards God's ultimate goal of reconciliation with and lordship overall of humanity and a sign of God's blessing on a group of believers, there are places where the words of Scripture show that God has room for small beginnings, adverse circumstances and faithfulness without measurable results. God challenges those who look down on small numbers by saying, "Who dares despise the day of small things" (Zech. 4:10)? Jesus affirms small faith when he compares the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed (Matt. 13:31, Mk. 4:31) and says that faith that is this small can still move mountains (Matt. 17:20). In the letters to the churches in Revelation, we see Jesus affirming what are likely small churches, seemingly acknowledging that persecution and opposition makes it difficult for the church to grow. Jesus offers comfort, not judgement, to the churches of Smyrna, Pergamum and Philadelphia which are examples of small churches struggling under adverse conditions.

This survey of the Scriptures indicates that God's desire for the church is increase. His desire is that all of humanity be reconciled to Him, and that Christians work together with Him to that end. As long as one person has not heard the Good News of Jesus Christ, all Christians should labour in the harvest field until all people heed the call to be reconciled with God. All Christians

should be striving for increase, and be concerned enough to ask questions when this is missing. We also see that there is room in God's heart for seasons of church life where numerical increase is missing. However, the witness of Scripture fails to specifically address the scenario we find ourselves in North America, where despite the absence of violent persecution, many churches fail to grow numerically.

Perhaps the answer lies, not so much in the results that come from our ministry, as it is in our heart attitude towards those who could, by their inclusion, make our churches grow.

Expansion and Inclusion

We now turn away from the results of our efforts to examine the heart of God in order to see that His agenda for increase is part of a bigger plan of reconciliation and inclusion. The essential nature of God as shown in the book of Genesis is that of a Being in community. A core belief of the Christian faith is that God is both three and one. Father, Son and Holy Spirit equal a singular triune God, existing with Himself in eternal community. This was explicitly described around 200 AD by Tertullian in his work, *Against Praxeas* where he says in Chapter 9,

Bear always in mind that this is the rule of faith which I profess; by it I testify that the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit are inseparable from each other, and so will you know in what sense this is said. Now, observe, my assertion is that the Father is one, and the Son one, and the Spirit one, and that They are distinct from Each Other (Tertullian 1885).

Dionysius, Bishop of Rome reflected further on this Divine Community approximately 50 years later when he wrote, “For the Divine Word must of necessity be united to the God of the Universe, and the Holy Spirit must have his habitation and abode in God; thus it is absolutely necessary that the Divine Triad be summed up and gathered into a unity” (Bettenson 1959, 45). In reflecting on the nature of the relationship between the members of the Trinity, Frank Viola surveys all of the references in the Gospel of John and concludes, “Within the triune God we discover mutual love, mutual fellowship, mutual dependence, mutual honor, mutual submission, mutual dwelling, and authentic community. In the Godhead, there exists an eternal, complementary, and reciprocal interchange of divine life, divine love, and divine fellowship” (Viola 2008, 35). This picture of the community within the Trinity seeks to find that balance between unity and trinity that the Christian Church has wrestled to explain over the past two millennia. Defining that properly is not the goal of this paper, but describing the nature of that relationship provides the foundational description of the heart of God regarding relationships. Volf summarizes this nature when he says, “the life of God is a life of self-giving and other-receiving love” (Volf 1996, 127).

Yet, while this community is complete and self-sustaining, God makes a decision to create something more. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Within that container of space and time, God makes the choice within His communal self to create something uniquely connected to Him/Them self: “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness... male and female He created them” (Gen. 1:26, 27). We see in this discussion that God,

while complete and harmonious as He is within Himself, seems to have a desire for more, and wants to welcome someone else into His pre-existent community. He gives this new being delegated dominion over what He has created, and then proceeds to have a relationship with him. While any attempt to discern the actual motivation of the Creator God is beyond us, the evidence seems to point to a desire for, or a willingness to expand the relational circle of the triune Godhead to include someone else – not as an equal exactly, but with a shared nature and even a shared sense of responsibility and authority over what has been created.

Into this perfect relational picture is injected the first “not good” when He says, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18). Here we see that embedded into the nature of humanity is a social need. We were not made to simply be alone, living in an exclusive, solitary spiritual relationship. So God creates Eve to be with Adam, as someone who exhibits a shared nature, substance and mandate. Both Adam and Eve are given dominion over creation, and both Adam and Eve are commanded to be fruitful and multiply. What we see in this command is that even in couplehood, humanity is not complete. There is to be many, not few. A mandate to increase and expand is present from the beginning.

In some ways, the mandate to take care of the earth remains after the fall, which is a different kind of “not good” in the biblical narrative, one that is not included by design. Genesis 3 shows that sin has made the task of stewarding the earth is made much more difficult. In addition to the difficulty of relating to Creation effectively, there is a relational difficulty as well: “Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you” (Gen. 3:16). Finally, and perhaps

most painful for God, is the separation between Himself and humanity as symbolized by their ejection from the garden. We now begin to see a new theme emerge that will be woven throughout the Biblical narrative: the restoration of the estranged. The idea of growth and expansion is no longer simply about the increase of Adam and Eve's delegated dominion over the earth; it is now subsumed into God's desire to welcome humanity back into harmonious relationship with Him – reconciliation.

After an interlude of difficult relationship between God and humanity as shown by the tower of Babel and the Flood, God chooses Abraham as the progenitor of a group of people to steer His relationship with humanity back towards reconciliation. His mandate to Abraham is not just for him to build a special family of chosen people, but to build a bridge of blessing between God and all nations. We see this in God's covenant with Abram, reiterated several times: "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you;" "all nations on earth will be blessed through him;" "through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me" (Gen. 12:3, 18:18, 22:18). Thus the blessing of increase and expansion has the purpose of reconciling all nations (implying all of humanity) to God through Abraham.

Throughout the unfolding history of the covenant with the nation of Israel, there is an ongoing theme of inclusion and expansion which reflects a concern for those outside of this seemingly exclusive relationship that God has with Israel. Exodus 19:5-6, Psalm 78:69, Amos 9:7 and Jonah 4 show God's concern for those outside of the confines of the Mosaic covenant. This concern for all nations

reaches a grand climax in the eschatological passages in Isaiah where we are repeatedly shown images of all the nations coming to the presence of God (Is. 2:2, 5:26, 11:10, 12, 14:26, 42:1, 43:9, 49:1, 22, 51:4, 5, and 55:5).

Two critical passages show God's heart of reconciliation towards those who are estranged from Him: The book of Hosea and Ezekiel 16. In God's prophetic mandate to Hosea, God tells him to live out in real life what God has experienced with the nation of Israel: "Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord" (Hos. 1:2). Hosea's relationship with his wife is incredibly troubled, full of infidelity and unfaithfully conceived children. The book of Hosea, while telling the story of Hosea's journey with his own wife, is filled with poignant descriptions of God's broken heart through the repeated cycles of betrayal, forgiveness and betrayal again. "What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears" (Hos. 6:4).

God's heart is for reconciliation however; throughout this account He repeatedly points to a future of restored relationship: "In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'children of the living God'" (Hos. 1:10); "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her" (Hos. 2:14); I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord" (Hos. 2:19) before finally declaring at the end of the account His invitation for Israel to come

to Him. He even gives them the words to say. “Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips” (Hos. 14:2). God’s plan has a final solution, not only to restore the relationship, but to make sure they never wander: “I will heal their waywardness and love them freely” (Hos. 14:4).

In Ezekiel, God tells a story about finding the nation of Judah broken and alone, cleaning her up, and committing Himself to a relationship with her. We get a glimpse into God’s heart as He talks about her betrayal and says, “I am filled with fury against you” (Ezek. 16:30). He describes the punishment that will result saying, “Because you did not remember the days of your youth but enraged me with all these things, I will surely bring down on your head what you have done” (Ezek. 16:43). God, in His own words, describes Himself as a betrayed husband: “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will deal with you as you deserve, because you have despised my oath by breaking the covenant” (Ezek. 16:59). But God still has a desire to be reconciled with estranged, betraying Judah: “Then my wrath against you will subside and my jealous anger will turn away from you; I will be calm and no longer angry...” (Ezek. 16:42). His plan is to make a new covenant with His people: “So I will establish my covenant with you, and you will know that I am the Lord. Then, when I make atonement for you for all you have done, you will remember and be ashamed and never again open your mouth because of your humiliation” (Ezek. 16:62, 63). The solution God has in Ezekiel echoes what He says in Hosea:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your

heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God. (Ezek. 36:25-28)

God's heart is for reconciliation, no matter how badly He has been wronged.

The Old Testament witness, then, shows that God's ongoing concern is to restore what was lost in Eden – *shalom*: the peaceful, unified dominion that humanity is to have over the earth, the relational harmony between people, and the relational intimacy between God and humanity through the blessing of His covenant relationship with Israel.

The ministry of Jesus brings a slight twist to this consistent narrative of expansion and inclusion. At times, Jesus seems to be exclusively concerned with only the Jewish people, especially in Matthew 15:24 when he says to the Canaanite woman, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel," and when He sends His disciples out to minister and tells them: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matt. 10:5,6).

The practical limitations of the focus of Jesus' ministry notwithstanding, the story of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-32) echoes the same themes we identified in Hosea and Ezekiel, but instead of locating them in the human context of a marriage covenant relationship, it is shown from the perspective of a father/son relationship instead. However, there is still the sense of betrayal and consequence as the son demands his inheritance from his father and then squanders it, estranging himself from the father whose love never wavers. The welcoming

embrace the prodigal receives upon returning home is yet another example of how badly God desires to be reconciled with His estranged children.

Thus, while the universal multi-national agenda does not seem to be a priority in Jesus' earthly ministry, the heart of God for reconciliation and inclusion is shown to be the same. Jesus still models inclusion in many smaller ways in His day to day life; not least of which is that He acquiesces to the Canaanite woman's request after her clever response reveals her faith in Him. Jesus also models inclusion by His reaching out to women and children, by His affirmation of the faith of non-Jews (Matt. 8:10, Lk. 7:9), and especially by the mandate He leaves His followers as He departs, when He says in the Great Commission: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations..." (Matt. 28:19).

It would seem that even though Jesus did not see the universal reconciliation of people to God as an actionable priority in His *earthly* ministry, the ministry of and following His crucifixion seems to expand in scope to become more globally focused. Volf sees Jesus' crucifixion as a natural consequence of the nature of the Trinity and the heart of God for reconciliation with estranged humanity:

That same love that sustains nonself-enclosed identities in the Trinity seeks to make space "in God" for humanity. Humanity is, however, not just the other of God, but the beloved other who has become an enemy. When God sets out to embrace the enemy, the result is the cross. On the cross the dancing circle of self-giving and mutually indwelling divine persons opens up for the enemy; in the agony of the passion the movement stops for a brief moment and a fissure appears so that sinful humanity can join in (see John 17:21). We, the others-we, the enemies-are embraced by the divine persons who love us with the same love with which they love each other and therefore make space for us within their own eternal embrace. (Volf 1996, 128, 129)

In the days following Jesus' ascension, the Church is given a charge that contains a new word for this attitude of expansion and inclusion as it is applied by Jesus' followers: reconciliation. The Apostle Paul challenges the Corinthians to "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20). In giving this challenge, Paul is acting in accordance to what he sees in God's heart which is that He "wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." (I Tim. 2:3). In his letter to the Colossians he talks about God's desire to reconcile all things to Himself through Christ (Col. 2:20). In Philippians, Paul points to the triumphant conclusion to the work of reconciliation when we see that "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Php. 2:10, 11).

Ephesians completes the trifecta when Paul describes Jesus as the one who breaks down the wall between us and God, and between each other (Eph. 2:14). In

Practice Resurrection, Eugene Peterson describes Jesus' ministry this way:

Jesus demolishes the wall that separates insiders and outsiders, lost and homeless men and women, aliens and strangers. In its place he builds a place of peace. As soon as the rubble is cleared away, a structure is built to welcome these once-upon-a-time alienated, hostile men and women into a place of hospitality (Peterson 2010, 127).

The witness of Scripture concludes in Revelation with a fully global picture of humanity as the redeemed are shown to be from all tribes and tongues (Rev. 7:9), and that the triumphant conclusion to the narrative of reconciliation is that "God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Rev. 21:3). Notice the echoing phrase from Ezekiel 36.

From these multiple examples, it is clear that God's concern extends to all of humanity, and that He desires His church to have a similar breadth of vision. Thus we can conclude that the Church was founded by Jesus Christ for this specific purpose of reconciliation of all people to God. Gary Nelson summarizes this: "God's reconciling activity in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:19) has as its goal not only the creation of individual holiness (Rom. 5:10-11) and a redeemed creation (Col. 1:20), but also, in the creation of community, a reconciliation between one another (Eph. 2:14-22)" (Nelson 2009, 45). There is an intent behind this gathering of people that implies not just a static existence, but an inclusive one. Quoting Jimmy Long, Nelson states, "The mission of the church since the time of Christ is to embody this reconciled community and invite others to be reconciled and renewed by joining this community" (Nelson 2009, 47).

Alan Roxburgh tells the story this way:

God is about a big purpose in and for the whole of creation. The church has been called into life to be both the means of this mission and a foretaste of where God is inviting all creation to go. Just as its Lord is a mission-shaped God, so the community of God's people exists, not for themselves, but for the sake of the work...A missional church is a community of God's people who live into the imagination that they are, by their very nature, God's missionary people living as a demonstration of what God plans to do in and for all of creation in Jesus Christ. (Roxburgh, Romanuk, and Gibbs 2006, xv)

We see that the growth of a church is not an end in itself, but rather a desirable outcome from fulfilling God's mission in this world through reconciling all people to God and adding them to the church community. If a group of people were motivated to fulfill God's mission, they would need to develop within

themselves certain attitudes and practices in order to align themselves with God's purposes and heart.

Defining Hospitality

We have come to understand that the growth of the church is desirable, but the driving motivation behind this desire should come from God's heart to be reconciled with all of humanity. In sharing the global, universal reach of God's seeking heart, it would seem natural that each follower of Christ would experience a development of interest in and compassion for including people who were previously outside the social circle of the gathered Church. It is this attitude that the Bible expects when it talks about hospitality. The living out of this particular form of hospitality can be seen throughout history and Scripture. It is identified not only as an attitude of the heart, but also as a discipline to be practiced. We see that this discipline is not always something that is natural and easy, but rather something that requires perseverance and sacrifice.

Culturally and historically the value of hospitality is common and widespread. Koenig states that the ancient cultures saw hospitality as "one of the pillars of morality upon which the universe stands. When guests or hosts violate their obligations to each other, the whole world shakes and retribution follows" (Koenig 2001). Mackie notes that "[t]he peculiar feature of Oriental hospitality is that it commands the most devoted service to be rendered to those who are passing strangers, and have none of the claims that belong to kinship and acquaintance." He says that the stranger, coming to the end of his resources, finds

himself with no alternative but to make a radical step of trusting those who would receive him – they could either care for him or destroy him. Because of the extreme risk of travelling beyond one’s borders, and the essential rarity of the arrival of a stranger, there is a “mysterious sacredness” to receiving one that seems to be spread across the entire history of the Middle East, as Mackie quotes the Koran saying, “The house that receives no guests never receives angels” (Mackie 1909, 136, 137).

Harper’s *Encyclopedia of Bible Life* says, “From the beginning, the concept of hospitality was a central part of Hebrew life, as indeed it was throughout the Fertile Crescent” and quotes a passage from the Egyptian book of the Dead that Jesus echoed in Matthew 25: “I have given bread to the hungry man and water to the thirsty man, and apparel to the naked man, and a boat to the shipwrecked mariner” (Miller and Miller 1978, 42). Jesus addressed this concept of welcoming the stranger or outsider a number of times saying things such as, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,” (Matt. 18:5). In doing so, he was building on these deeply rooted Middle Eastern values of helping strangers. These sentiments of inclusion and reconciliation are found in the mandates for fairness, compassion and equality towards foreigners living as strangers among the nation of Israel. They pervade the Old Testament in passages such as Leviticus 19:33,34; Deuteronomy 10:18, 19; the book of Ruth, Psalm 146:9; Isaiah 56:3,6; Jeremiah 22:3. Leviticus 19:34. The unique foundation of the Hebrew practice of hospitality can be summed up in the recurring phrase: “for you were foreigners in Egypt.” This word, foreigner (*ger*), can also be translated

“stranger” or “sojourner,” referring to someone who is not a fully-entitled resident of the land. Within the boundaries of the nation of Israel, this would be a non-Jew (Archer and Waltke 1980, 1:330, 331). God wants His people, in their practice of welcoming strangers/foreigners in to their lands and homes, to remember their own heritage as wanderers and strangers; to be grateful for how other nations and God Himself have taken them in.

While the word hospitality is not actually used in the Old Testament, it is clearly assumed and forms the etymology of the Greek word translated as hospitality in English: *χενοφιλια* (*xenophilia*). *χενο* (*xeno*) meaning “stranger,” and *φιλια* (*philia*) meaning “love.” Literally, hospitality means “stranger-love.” This type of love, *phileo* love, is a brotherly love. Thus one who practices hospitality is one who loves the stranger as if they were part of the family. *χενος* (*xenos*) carries a deeper meaning than just “one whom I do not know,” however. “In primitive society the stranger is basically an enemy, because he is unknown and therefore sinister” (Bietenhard 1975, 686). “Stranger-love” is thus concisely defined as “loving your enemy as if they were family.” We see this ideal of hospitality expressed in Jesus’ teaching when He challenged His disciples to love their enemies in Matthew 5 and Luke 6. This radical definition of hospitality entails a great deal of risk and thus requires trust in God to protect as loving our enemies exposes us to them in ways that would otherwise seem foolish.

The emphasis on hospitality and the extending of one’s friendship to those outside of our comfortable circle is ubiquitous not only in the heritage, teaching

and practice of Jesus, but throughout the rest of the New Testament. Romans 12:13 tells us to “Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.” I Peter 1:9 acknowledges that hospitality is not something we naturally do, and that it has a cost when we are challenged to “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling,” while the Epistle to the Hebrews encourages us: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:2). These instructions are more than simple encouragements to be good citizens. In Matthew 25, Jesus shows that the practice of loving the stranger is tied to loving Christ Himself. This passage places practicing hospitality well at the very centre of the Christian life:

³¹ When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

⁴⁰ The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

⁴¹ Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

⁴⁴ They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

⁴⁵ He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

⁴⁶ Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

I quote the passage in its entirety because it is central to our understanding of Christian hospitality. Pohl calls this “the most important passage for the entire tradition on Christian hospitality...[it] resounds throughout the ancient texts, and contemporary practitioners of hospitality refer to this text more often than to any other passage” (Pohl 1999). In this passage, we see Jesus explaining that often opportunities to practice hospitality go unnoticed, even by those who are attempting to follow the way of Jesus. Those who are accursed are those who would name Jesus as Lord, but who are missing the fundamental heart attitude that seeks to alleviate suffering in those all around them. On the other hand, there are those who are simply doing what comes naturally to them, never thinking of a reward, nor does it occur to them that caring for the stranger is connected to Jesus in any way. Yet these are the ones who are rewarded. I agree with Pohl. By placing Himself on the receiving end of every Christian's love of strangers, Jesus unveils a universal expectation that He has of those who claim the title of Christian. When we are able to focus our energies on these tasks, He applauds and affirms that we are living up to our calling and identity. When, however, we all too often fail in resolutely acting out this passage, we are rightly called to account.

Christine Pohl says that “Hospitality is a way of life fundamental to Christian identity. Its mysteries, riches and difficulties are revealed most fully as it is practiced” (Pohl 1999). She says that “Hospitality is not optional for Christians, nor is it limited to those who are specially gifted for it. It is, instead, a necessary practice in the community of faith” (Pohl 1999). Taken by themselves, these comments could seem extreme. However, as we have surveyed the wealth

of references to God's attitude towards humanity, we can see that she captures the heart of the matter accurately. A Christian without a heart of hospitality has missed the heart of God. As Volf observes, "Inscribed on the very heart of God's grace is the rule that we can be its recipients only if we do not resist being made into its agents; what happens to us must be done by us. Having been embraced by God, we must make space for others in ourselves and invite them in—even our enemies" (Volf 1996, 129). Hospitality, defined as a self-giving love for strangers, is a central attitude and practice for Christians.

The Benedictine practice of hospitality is a prime example of what self-giving love for strangers can look like in real life. The Rule of St Benedict states in Chapter 53 "On the Reception of Guests:" "Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ, for He is going to say, 'I came as a guest, and you received Me' (Matt. 25:35). It goes farther to state that the lowlier the guest, the more effort that should be made to receive them thus: "In the reception of the poor and of pilgrims the greatest care and solicitude should be shown, because it is especially in them that Christ is received; for as far as the rich are concerned, the very fear which they inspire wins respect for them" (St Benedict of Nursia 1900). This is completely in line with Jesus' command to focus our giving on those who cannot repay us in Luke 14:12-14:

Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Taken all together, the challenges to practice the discipline of hospitality and the mandate to give to those not able to pay us back, show that the practice of hospitality is an essential part of the Christian identity both personally and corporately.

This attitude and practice are not given solely as required disciplines, but are practices beneficial to the overall health of a Christian community. The witness of Henri Nouwen and Jean Vanier, based on their firsthand experiences, both serve to emphasize this. Nouwen says hospitable Christian community “is not a closed circle of people embracing each other, but a forward-moving group of companions bound together but the same voice asking for their attention” (Nouwen 1986, 154). Vanier, in *Community and Growth*, not only describes the essential attitude of hospitality, but explicitly ties it to the vitality and growth of the community when he says that “Welcome is one of the signs that a community is alive...If a community is closing its doors, that is a sign that hearts are closing as well...A loving community is attractive, and a community which is attractive is by definition welcoming. Life brings new life” (Vanier 2002).

It is in Vanier’s observation that I find the strongest connection between a vibrant, growing community of Christians and the heart of hospitality and welcome. Growth may be a desirable by-product of a healthy community, but if a church is not growing, then perhaps one of the first things people should consider is the condition of their hearts. Each person must make up their mind that their experience and practice of public worship and belonging will include an extension of themselves towards those that they do not know. Volf uses the term “embrace”

to encompass both the initial decision to welcome the stranger, and living it out. He says that the openness to embrace is “the will to give ourselves to others and ‘welcome’ them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity” (Volf 1996). This is a costly form of welcome, in that it could require change on our part. Nouwen cuts to the heart of the matter when he says, “Really honest receptivity means inviting the stranger into our world on his or her terms, not on ours” (Nouwen 1986, 98). He describes how hospitality (stranger-love) might be practiced in *Reaching Out* where he says that it can be “the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them the space where change can take place” (Nouwen 1986, 71). A free space where the agenda is not to change the other person, but to see them as they are. The practice of this kind of hospitality is an appropriate response to Jesus’ teaching to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matt 5:44), and who challenges us to forgive those who trespass against us and thus creates a pathway to turn enemies into friends (Matt. 18:21-35).

When considering how this attitude can be channeled into creating a hospitable space, Pohl offers this description: “When we offer hospitality to strangers, we welcome them into a place to which we are somehow connected – a space that has meaning and value to us... Such welcome involves attentive listening and a mutual sharing of lives and life stories. It requires an openness of heart, a willingness to make one’s life visible to others, and a generosity of time

and resources” (Pohl 1999). This free space of connecting is generated when someone offers an attentive listening ear, a willingness to share from one’s own life story, and room is made for a mutual connection of equals. This mutuality requires, or at very least causes, vulnerability on the part of the host.

Thus, acting out the intention to make space for strangers will be costly. Pohl devotes a chapter to discussing this issue in *Making Room*, entitled “The Fragility of Hospitality.” In it, she describes the challenges, real and perceived, of limited resources, the ambiguity of boundaries, the possibility of being taken advantage of, all stand in the way of achieving the ideal of a truly open door (Pohl 1999). Readjusting our identities, withholding judgement, inviting unknown people into a known space, attentive listening, mutual sharing of lives and stories... these are all very costly and difficult things to do. There is a great deal of giving and sacrifice, vulnerability and risk inherent in this posture. And it gets worse.

There is a mutuality inherent in healthy hospitality. Effectively practicing hospitality means that when someone comes in as a stranger and they are welcomed into the free space of mutual sharing, they are also invited to do more than just take from us what they need and then leave. A recipient of hospitality will naturally desire to make a contribution. We see this in Jennifer’s testimony from *Essential Church*: “...everyone wants to make a difference. I don’t know anyone who wants to go through life without having some impact...people just want to make a difference” (Rainer and Rainer 2008). This is contrary to what most of us feel when someone new shows up in a relational context. “What do

they want?” is the natural response. In my experience, a new person coming into a church context usually presents some sort of need, but if they are genuinely welcomed into community they tend to move beyond purely receiving into some level of mutual contribution or participation. They often have ideas about how to do things differently. This perhaps is when the practice of hospitality becomes most threatening: when the presence of newcomers changes the way things are. Pohl describes it this way: “By welcoming strangers...the community’s identity is always being challenged and revised, if only slightly. While this is often enriching, it can occasionally stretch a place beyond recognition” (Pohl 1999, 136). This is often when the limits of hospitality are felt – when the guest seeks to change how the host does things and wants to participate as an agent as well as a recipient. The host experiences a lack of gratitude and the guest can feel a sense of rejection.

The potential risks of genuine hospitality should be balanced by a sense of the benefits. The Alban Institute blog says that hospitality is not simply a challenge for us to be more other focused and less selfish. It’s for our own good:

We show hospitality to strangers not merely because they need it, but because we need it, too. The stranger at the door is the living symbol and memory that we are all strangers here. This is not our house, our table, our food, our lodging; this is God’s house and table and food and lodging. We were pilgrims and wanderers, aliens and strangers, even enemies of God, but we, too, were welcomed into this place. To show hospitality to the stranger is, as Gordon Lathrop has observed, to say, ‘We are beggars here together. Grace will surprise us both.’ (Alban 2007)

It is when we consider the costs and risks of genuine hospitality that we see why such a strong case needs to be made from the weight of Scriptural evidence. If we could find any way around this kind of costly vulnerability, we would. Our

natural inclination is to resist any notion of paying this kind of price. However, newcomers are Christ coming to us under an assumed identity. How we treat them is how we treat Jesus.

Conclusion

As we have seen, it is natural to desire church growth. However, growth for growth's sake does not look deep enough. An ambitious desire to constantly expand the particular church one is part of (or leading) can very easily become something entirely foreign to the heart of God. Looking deeper into the heart of God, we see that the desire for growth comes from His desire to be reconciled in a loving relationship with all of humanity. A desire for growth that proceeds from this heart of inclusion and reconciliation is the antidote to seeing growth as the end, rather than a means. It leads to an attitude of hospitality that genuinely values each person that churches or individuals Christian encounter. This is the biblical foundation and, as such, is a wonderful theory. The subject of Chapter Three is what the current state of research tells us about how this can be applied in a local church context.

CHAPTER THREE:
CONTEMPORARY MINISTRY AND
RESEARCH LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is focused on understanding the experience of new people as they encounter the WFCM church family so that the church family may be better equipped to welcome them. The previous chapter wrestled with whether growth is a non-negotiable for a church, established the heart attitude that God has towards strangers, and clarified the challenge for Christians to embrace and expand their own hearts of hospitality. This chapter will locate a focus for welcoming the stranger in the WFCM context through a survey of recent viewpoints in evangelism, church growth, and relational connections with a local church by reviewing what the current state of research tells us about how a heart of hospitality can be practiced in a local church context. I will show that the Sunday morning service is an appropriate beginning point for an established church, so long as there is a purpose beyond being friendly.

The Growth Question

As we observed in the last chapter, there is a tension that comes up as we experience God's heart for reconciliation with all people. He desires to enfold all of humanity within the covenant relationship of "They will be His people and He

will be their God.” (Ezek. 16, Rev. 22). Thus, God hopes for His people to share that desire, to act accordingly, and to mobilize effectively to that end. Dann Spader, in *Growing a Healthy Church*, begins with the poignant question: “To be healthy, church growth experts say we need to be seeing 10 percent growth a year. Where have we gone wrong?” (Mayes and Spader 1993, 9). This was the problem driving our research question: WFMC was attracting over one hundred first time visitors every year to the Sunday morning services, there was every indication that the services themselves were meeting expectations, we were not losing people, and yet the average annual attendance was not going up. Lack of growth was seen as an indicator that something was lacking in the health of our church. Upon reflecting theologically, the answer has come that paying attention to growth, numbers and size indicators can be part of a valid search for health only if our hearts are first in the right place, and we are properly focused on welcoming the stranger out of love for God and neighbour. This conclusion is reinforced when we survey the current perspectives in research and practice around church health and growth.

Often, a tension exists between the “embodying” and “inviting/joining” functions of the church’s mission. In church leadership, there are two extremes of focus that can result from this tension. The first is a focus on quantitative growth as a way of measuring the effectiveness of the witness and welcome of the church, which tends to lose sight of the qualitative measuring of how deeply kingdom values and lifestyle have infiltrated the individuals within the church. The Church Growth Movement, first conceived by Donald McGavran in his book,

The Bridges of God, sometimes attracts those who favour this end of the spectrum. McGavran began simply enough, with the question “Why do some churches grow and some churches don’t?” (Rainer 1993). The assumption is that a church ought to grow; that being faithful to God entailed an environment and people that are amenable to growth.

If our church is warm and welcoming; if there is an outward look to it, accompanied by prayer and expectancy on the part of the minister and congregation, then it should become a magnet in the locality. People will want to bring their friends along. It will grow in the natural course of events. (Green 1991, 310)

However, critics have argued that the church growth movement focuses too much on pragmatism and clever programming at the expense of other aspects of the mission of the Church. Gary Nelson describes the results of an extreme, exclusive focus on growth when he says,

Quantitative growth, while essential to the life of the church, was too often the measurement of choice without the balancing tension of qualitative growth that evaluated the character and depth of the gospel’s incorporation into the lives of the individuals and their lives together. (Nelson 2009, 48)

Willard Metzger, in *Going Missional*, shares his own internal conflict that is certainly typical of my experience when he says,

As a pastor, I admit that sometimes my dreams of outreach effectiveness were coloured by my need to be seen as a leader of a growing and therefore successful church. Growth is not an ignoble cause. But growth was often as much about my own image as it was about seeing the image of God realized in the hearts of others. (Stiller and Metzger 2010, 2)

Frost and Hirsch point out that in addition to the motivational turmoil it can cause in church leaders, an attractional church can become dysfunctional by misunderstanding their place in society.

By anticipating that if they get their internal features right, people will flock to the services, the church betrays its belief in attractionalism...If we get our seating, our parking, our children's programs, our preaching and our music right, they will come. This assumes that we have a place in our society and that people don't join our churches because, though they want to be Christians, they're unhappy with our product. (Frost and Hirsch 2013, 19)

Canadian churches certainly need to accept that in many ways we are offering a product that few people are looking for. Nelson affirms the futility of fully embracing an attractional ministry approach in Canada when he observes that many Canadians "are simply living in the sincere belief that they have found a much more meaningful way to live their lives out on Sunday, let alone Monday and beyond" (Nelson 2009, 17).

The Missional Church movement (Guder 1998) attempts to respond to this reality, and represents movement towards the other end of the spectrum. Leaning away from a focus on attractional growth, the missional approach tends to focus on healthy community, contemplative spirituality and compassionate service to the world around the local church. Alan Roxburgh defines a missional church this way:

A missional church is a community of God's people who live into the imagination that they are, by their very nature, God's missionary people living as a demonstration of what God plans to do in and for all of creation in Jesus Christ. (Roxburgh, Romanuk, and Gibbs 2006, xv)

Taken to the extreme, a focus on mission can lead to a corresponding lack of attention to, and in some cases hostility towards, the idea that an increase in numbers is part of a healthy church's mission. One issue that arises from a missional focus is that in seeking a balanced approach to growth and numbers, it can become all about sending and not about gathering at all. This understanding

sees the Kingdom of God solely as “social activism that is for the common good and accomplished in the public sector” (McKnight 2014). Secondly, a missional focus sometimes comes with a reluctance to deal with the issue of conversion, repentance or submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Scot McKnight offers an insider’s critique to those who lean to this end of the spectrum in a *Christianity Today* article entitled, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church:” “Any movement that is not evangelistic is failing the Lord...we must always keep the proper goal in mind: summoning everyone to follow Jesus Christ and discover the redemptive work of God in Christ through the Spirit of God” (McKnight 2007). Numbers of people and conversions do actually matter, because they represent significant steps of faith. Moving to the extreme missional end of the spectrum can result in downplaying or ignoring these important aspects of healthy church life.

I find myself dissatisfied with both extremes of the spectrum. The Natural Church Development (NCD) approach theorizes that “healthy things grow” and that a healthy church will grow “all by itself.” They suggest that if a church is not growing, church leaders should examine which internal or external factors are at play; perhaps something is keeping the church from being healthy, and therefore, growing. This perspective assumes that it is impossible for church leaders to manufacture healthy growth; that it happens “all by itself.” NCD steers church leaders towards examining the environmental conditions of the church and doing their best to remove everything that stands in the way of growth (Schwarze 1996, 12). This is certainly a more balanced approach. Galindo, in his chapter on congregational size, grapples with the tension between church growth and church

health by focusing his discussion on how each size of church relates to outsiders differently. He downplays the idea that bigger is better when he states that “the fact of the matter is that there is no *theological* reason for insisting that a congregation needs to grow in numerical size” (Galindo 2004, 77). NCD and Galindo’s work offer perspectives that seem to lend themselves to a healthy balance between a focus on growing a church through attraction and focusing solely on mission.

Perhaps a missional/attractional balance can reflect our experience of breathing. We breathe in and it feels good. Deeper breaths are healthier and produce pleasant calming sensations. But soon we cannot breathe in anymore and the impulse comes to release the breath. Lack of growth in a church may indicate a dysfunction on one end of the breath or the other. The pattern in the book of Acts includes both a sending out impulse (Acts 8:14; 9:30; 11:22; 13:4; 15:33 and so on) and a gathering impulse (Acts 14:21-23, 16:5). While the sending/going of the Apostles is more explicitly evident, especially in Paul’s mode of operating, we see by the evidence of what Paul left behind as he continued on in his travels, that there was a need to gather the new believers into a group in each city. When he would return through the places he had been he would be strengthening the groups he had left behind. The assumption being that he had somehow managed to forge them into a group with their own identity separate from the Jewish synagogue. All sending and no gathering leads to a dispersed, centerless group. While all gathering and no sending will eventually end up with nothing to gather. I see this balance when Jesus tells his disciples to look at the harvest around them

(Matt. 9:37). Workers go out into the harvest *with the purpose of gathering it in*.

A healthy congregation should have a balance of both. It should be outgoing enough that there is a steady flow of people back to the gathering. Frost and Hirsch find this balance in an exercise they learned from Leonard Sweet:

Len told us about how he will often get Christians who come to his conferences to stand in a large circle around the room. He said that they always stand shoulder-to-shoulder facing inward. When he points this out, they immediately adopt the opposite stance and face outward. But, Leonard Sweet reminds them, a totally outward-facing church isn't being everything a church should be. He then asks them to stand facing each other with one shoulder facing the centre of the circle and the other facing out. (Frost and Hirsch 2013, 45, 46)

Frost and Hirsch use this example to illustrate the changes in thought patterns that are so difficult for people to make in order for the church to adjust to the changing environment around them.

Reggie McNeal, in *Missional Renaissance* offers a metaphor that sharpens the focus further - the airport:

The airport is a place of connection, not a destination. Its job is to help people get somewhere else. An airport-centric world of travel would be dull and frustrating, no matter how nice the airport is. When the church thinks it's the destination, it also confuses the scorecard... The church is a connector, linking people to the kingdom life God has for them. Substituting church activity as the preferred life expression is as weird as believing that airports are more interesting than the destinations they serve. (McNeal 2009, 45)

Since WFMC is a more established church with a distinctly attractional history, the airport image can be helpful in reorienting our focus from numbers only to seeing attendance numbers as a significant indicator of how many people are passing through on their way to and from Kingdom ministry assignments. Thus when asking the poignant question in response to a lack of growth, "What are we

doing wrong?” the answer must take into account that both sending and gathering impulses are needed by the church.

Locating the Practice of Hospitality

On the surface, WFMC can seem to be a lingering throwback to the “good old attractional days,” where people just dropped in to church out of curiosity, seeking a known quantity called Christianity. However, as I have sought reasons for why newcomers continue to visit our Sunday services, there is inevitably evidence of contact prior to their coming to the church building. Certainly there are Christian people moving into the community who are church-shopping, but people without a church background, long-term Weyburn residents, and lapsed Christians inevitably choose to come to our weekend services because they have had contact with a pastor, church member or group activity that has generated curiosity about what happens at our big events on the weekends. WFMC seems to have a natural going-out rhythm that leads to a natural flow of people coming to the gathering.

Therefore, I have taken the stance that paying attention to the statistics of attendance at our Sunday services is an important measure of our church’s vitality. Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger reinforce this belief by their assertion that Sunday service attendance is still a useful measure of a church’s overall vitality because,

Church growth/vitality is not only about attracting people. It is about attaching them to others and to a place of ministry. It is about life transformation. Research indicates that people only remain in worship services over time as they are moved to greater levels of commitment. Measuring the church’s annual average

weekly attendance measures the ability of the church to attach people, not just attract them. Many churches may be able to lead people to Christ, but then fail to assimilate them into the life of the church. (Rainer and Geiger 2006, 250)

Canadian researchers Bibby, Reimer and Wilkinson agree with this sentiment, measuring Sunday service attendance in their research (Reimer and Wilkinson 2015, 10). While Bibby focused on monthly attendance trends, explaining that the busy-ness and complexity of Canadians' lives made weekly measures obsolete, Reimer and Wilkinson felt that weekly attendance acknowledges the different levels of commitment that are represented by claiming weekly attendance versus less than weekly (Bibby 2012,). They both, however, still feel that Sunday morning attendance is a significant measure of the vitality of a local church.

So when Keifert locates this initial hospitable response firmly in the context of a Church's weekend worship services, I am encouraged:

Unlike the pattern in the three decades after WWII, when people typically sought out pastors or congregational members before they came to church, most unchurched visitors in the 1980's made their first formal contacts with the institutional church as unannounced visitors to 'check out' Sunday morning worship services. As a result, Sunday morning worship has become a moment of evangelism whether Christians like it or not – indeed whether they are prepared or not. (Keifert 1992)

One could argue that this reflects an American context that is twenty-five years old. Wilk suggests that this is no longer the case, and perhaps not even the ideal we should be striving for. She uses the words of her daughter in the introduction to her booklet, *Don't Invite Them to Church* says it bluntly: "...you don't want Christians to invite people to church, you want them to love their neighbours and *be the church*" (Wilk 2010). While I agree wholeheartedly with the idea of loving our neighbours, our experience at WFMC shows us that Sunday morning is still

where we first become aware of the majority of newcomers to our ministry context. Our experience agrees with Keifert's description. Anecdotal conversations with newcomers consistently reveal that showing up on Sunday morning was not the first step of commitment for them, but it was a significant one. One man said that coming to our church building meant he would be seen and identified as "someone who goes there." A woman shared that she was afraid that she would burst into flames when she crossed the threshold. Many newcomers have shared that the walk from their car to the doors of the church was a very difficult one. Each year we have approximately one hundred first time local visitors who come unannounced to check us out. Thus the challenge to practice hospitality within the context of our Sunday morning services is still there for WPMC.

Other research affirms that Sunday morning services may be a more likely welcoming space for first-time guests than many had come to believe. Rainer affirms that many unchurched and unreached people still visit churches. "[U]nchurched does not mean 'never in church'...even one million atheists and agnostics attended church on Easter Sunday 1999. It is highly likely that an unchurched person will 'try' your church at some point" (Rainer 2008, 221). Thus even though there is question as to whether attracting people to a Sunday service is the most effective means of reaching people for Christ, our local experience combined with supporting research, is sufficient to point us towards examining our Sunday morning time slot for evidence of hospitality or lack thereof.

Hospitality should lead to Transformative Community

Before discussing what that space might look like, if it were to be made more intentionally hospitable, we need to clarify the end. As we saw in chapter two, it must be more than just making space, but rather opening a pathway for developing deeper relationships and being invited into partnership in the mission of the church. Truly welcoming the stranger means allowing them to engage in the life of the community to such an extent that they are able to make a contribution, and thus alter the shape of the community itself. We need to be and serve with other people in order to grow spiritually. This kind of community is described in Acts 2:

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

Acts 2 shows us that people would worship together and join in smaller groups that would gather in homes. These practices are still effective when used in churches today because they minister to the deep need within each of us. Larry Crabb describes the church as “a spiritual community journeying together toward God...where such community does not exist, there is no church” (Crabb 1999, 22). In *The Safest Place on Earth*, Crabb states that “We would give nearly anything to be part of a community that was profoundly safe, where people never gave up on each other, where wisdom about how to live emerged from conversation, where what is most alive in each of us is touched” (Crabb 1999,

124). This is what the strangers are actually looking for. Rainer quotes Neal McGlohon as saying, “True spiritual seekers are looking for relationships. Church shoppers are looking for friendly. One reason church shoppers are satisfied with friendly is because their relationship space is already full... [Spiritual seekers] want to know if there is space for new relationships to help them on their journey. Most church people have no space to offer seekers, so seekers will simply ‘bounce off’ the local church” (Rainer and Stetzer 2014, 109).

In the *Celtic Way of Evangelism*, George Hunter studied the relationally open hospitality evangelism strategy of St Patrick and his Celtic missionary movement. He describes a process whereby a new person would encounter a greeter, (porter) a pastor, (the abbot) and then be gradually invited deeper and deeper into involvement with the life of the community through a spiritual partner, a small group and ministry team. The question of “When did you become a Christian?” would be a difficult one to answer because, as Hunter says, “After some days, or weeks, you would find yourself believing what these Christians believe, and they would invite you to commit your life to Christ and his will for your life” (Hunter 2000, 52, 53). In interviews with recent converts to Christianity, Hunter’s own research confirmed what Finney reported in *Finding Faith Today: How does it Happen?*: “...belonging comes before believing” (Hunter 2000, 54). Hunter says that he discovered that “many new believers report that the experience of fellowship *enabled* them to believe and commit” (Hunter 2000, 54). In fact, Hunter’s research into the Methodist movement revealed that the ministry of hospitality welcomed seekers into class meetings,

and even into membership “before they believed or had experienced anything” (Hunter 2000).

Belonging leads to believing and life change. We are often so focused on the proclamation of the truth through preaching and teaching that we underestimate the transformative power of simply inviting others to be with us as we do life together. “Our most transformational resource is being together” (Pohl 1999, 159). In *Move*, the research team at the Willow Creek Association discovered that “[s]piritual community shows up as a growth catalyst...” (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011). Rainer’s research agrees with this, saying, “We cannot grow effectively as a believer in isolation” (Rainer 2015). This research is a significant challenge to many Christians who often focus on the pastoral leader as the source of the most important inputs that result in spiritual growth. “Because we are unaware of the significance of our friendship and fellowship, our best resources often remain inaccessible to strangers” (Pohl 1999, 160).

In addition to being the key to life transformation, bringing people into relationships effectively will help a seeking stranger stick with a church. When reaching out to younger people, Rainer found,

that the small group was the highest correlative factor in member retention... The point is that the expectation of a person being in a small group is vital toward retention of those in the church. Once they build relationships in that small group, the likelihood of their departure drops significantly... Those who were in a small group and attended worship service were *five times* more likely to be active in church than those who attended worship services alone. More than eight out of ten of the members who were active in a small group were still active in the church five years later. But only two of ten were still active in church five years later if they attended worship services only. (Rainer and Rainer 2008, 213)

In *Simple Church*, a survey of the history of Rainer’s church research showed that

this principle applied equally to everyone: “The picture is clear: people stick to a church when they get involved in a small group. If people only come to a service, they can drop out without anyone knowing. When people move to a group, they are known” (Rainer and Geiger 2006, 153, 154).

Welcoming newcomers into relationships is a challenge that is nuanced by the size of the local church. WPMC is a church of approximately 250 weekly attenders. Galindo says that the challenge for a church of our size is that we need to be constantly starting new small groups in order to allow new people to develop the intimate kind of friendships they need to belong and to grow. He adds a time crunch when he says,

leadership needs to intentionally put in place structures and processes that track new members to ensure that 80 percent of all newcomers...are involved in a small group within six months. (Galindo 2004, 89)

This echoes McGlohon’s contention that seekers are looking for relationships. Galindo says that they are in a short-lived transitional space where they are open to changing the values, patterns and commitments that guide their lives. So when welcoming a stranger to church, there is a spiritual unction based on the idea that every stranger wears the face of Jesus, and then there is the added urgency that they might not be receptive for long.

Community should lead to Mobilization

The discussion thus far has been entirely focused on how to bring people in and get them connected. Healthy hospitality resolves the problem of the eternal inhale by naturally moving people through to mission. Effectively practicing

hospitality will have deeper implications that involve more than making space; and more than inviting strangers deeper into community; it also means that when someone comes in as a stranger, they are invited to do more than just take what they need and then leave. As I mentioned earlier Jennifer's testimony in *Essential Church* is instructive as she says that "...everyone wants to make a difference" (S. Rainer and Rainer 2008). A welcome only on the level of giver-receiver transactions denies the true nature of community. "Community implies mutuality...A community is more than another name for intimate self-disclosure and emotional support. A community creates opportunities for being together where the possibilities of shared values can move members to action in the public square"(Galindo 2004, 31).

Move shows that a significant catalyst in moving from "I believe" to "I am committed" is participation in ministry:

[S]erving is the most catalytic experience offered by the Church...When we serve as his hands and feet, whether within a church ministry or outside the church, we grow to be more like Jesus...serving should be a high priority for our churches, since such experiences appear to be more conducive to spiritual growth than blockbuster weekend services. (Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, 116)

Thus when people are added to a church, new people receive salvation and become part of the congregation. As part of engaging in the life of community in the church, lives are transformed. The natural end result of the cycle the early believers were experiencing in Acts was inevitably the going out, proclaiming and living the Lordship of Jesus Christ, which led to the ongoing addition of more people to the community. The exhale allowed for another breath in. When a church is not adding new people, this particular movement is something to be

taken seriously, studied and addressed with corrective action. The strengths of the church should be used as a foundation for building a stronger, healthier church family that is capable of going out on mission, then welcoming and transforming more lives to the glory of God. The ultimate goal of any kind of growth through addition is that the church, individually and corporately is “becoming so completely transformed into a community of love that through it the invisible God again makes himself visible to the world” (Stott 2007, 69). So when locating the initial hospitable space on Sunday morning, it must be done with a view towards building relational connections that lead to transformative community and missional partnership in ministry.

Hospitality Practically Applied

If a church wants to grow out of a genuine heart of hospitality, they would need to begin with the shift in motivation that was described in chapter 2. Attending or leading church services needs to become less about the self being served, and more about serving others. We all must recapture the heart of God for the stranger, and see that Sunday morning is a key time for us to extend the welcome of the Kingdom of God. Pastors and other leaders need to find ways to keep the heart and practice of hospitality in the forefront of their motivation and planning, while there must also be a corresponding shift in the minds and hearts of regular attenders. Regular attenders will often be unaware that anything needs to change in how their church responds to newcomers. What most people mean when they describe their church as friendly is that “we are comfortable with each

other and make a good first impression on visitors” (Rainer and Stetzer 2014, 108). McIntosh offers three pieces of advice to help regular attenders make the necessary shift in perspective:

- “I suggest that we begin getting ready for company by eliminating the term visitor from our church vocabulary. In its place let’s insert the term guest” (McIntosh 2006, 13).
- “Getting ready for guests requires us to think of ourselves as hosts and those who visit us as our guests” (McIntosh 2006, 18).
- “Everyone in your church should be a greeter. Or a better way to put it is that everyone in your church should be willing to serve others” (McIntosh 2006, 117).

McIntosh goes on to say that this shift in perspective can lead to a desire to see through a guest’s eyes when they visit Sunday services. He says that guests will be asking several typical questions: ‘Is there room for me?’ ‘Is there room for me personally?’ ‘Is there room for me relationally?’ and ‘Is it worth it?’ (McIntosh 2006, 38). These questions are extremely important to understand, because it forces people who have become comfortable within the church to see their familiar surroundings and relationships with from a new vantage point.

Hunter says that this perspective shift is important because for many newcomers

Their visit is the most misperceived signal in local churches today, and the churches’ most neglected opportunity. Often, following their visit, visitors feel ignored, or judged, or misunderstood, or unwanted, and they may conclude that God doesn’t understand or want them either. (Hunter 2000, 117)

Once the people of a church have had a chance to understand the perspective and

feelings of a guest to their services, they will hopefully be motivated to make the experience of guests a priority in how they design, build, decorate and maintain their facilities, as well as examining every step a guest will take in experiencing the church for the first time (McIntosh 2006, 107).

Churches can intentionally build a more welcoming space by asking two questions: “What are the challenges within our church environment to intentionality, and how can we address them?” and “What are the challenges within our church environment to cultivate relationships, and how can we address them” (Rainer and Stetzer 2014, 112)? A church usually has four tests a newcomer must pass before they are worthy of belonging and receiving the full benefits of being part of the community of faith:

1. The fit-in test – do you look like us, like our music, think like us?
2. The involvement test – do you attend enough events in a given time period to prove that you are committed to us?
3. The language test – can you understand or decipher the Christian dialect that we use with each other?
4. The building and grounds test – can you find the rooms, doors and events that happen in our building? (Rainer and Stetzer 2014, 107,108)

These tests are most often not conscious ones, nor are they applied as intentional barriers to keep people out of most churches. They are more often an instinctive, unconscious habit that results from our human tendency to seek comfortable patterns and create safe spaces for ourselves. This means that most churches, unless they are intentionally conscious about the barriers that exist for newcomers, are not actually very hospitable. Examining these common obstacles to hospitality will help church leaders create more intentionally welcoming spaces.

Christine Pohl suggests, “Hospitable spaces make room for friendships to grow” (Pohl 1999, 157). Intentionally relational churches work diligently to become more focused on inviting people *in* to relationships as opposed to filtering certain people *out*. A truly hospitable space will be measured not only by how it feels, but what it leads to:

1. They produce family – transformational in disciple-making through healing of broken families of origin and accountability for making better choices in the future.
2. They produce one-on-one relationships, allowing for the uniqueness of each person’s needs.
3. They provide space for difficult people – high needs people **MUST** be given the space, time and attention they need, despite the challenges they pose. This is a true test of the sincerity of a person or group’s heart of hospitality.
4. Systems and processes – relationships aren’t program-driven, but programs can be relationship-driven. Programs are only valued if they do what they are supposed to, thus are allowed to die if they no longer produce what is required (Rainer and Stetzer 2014, 113–17).

Conclusion

This chapter has built on the theological imperative to hospitality and intensified the challenge for WFMC to be a hospitable community for newcomers in response to an unchanging bottom line of average attendance. I have

established that a love for strangers will lead to a healthy balance of growth and missional mindsets. I have located that the initial focus for evaluating and improving WFMC's hospitable response to newcomers is the context of the Sunday morning worship services. Finally, I have offered some resources and principles that can guide any church that wants to create a more effective welcoming space for guests to their church. The next chapter will describe how we sought to apply these principles and act on the resources I have uncovered.

CHAPTER FOUR: PROJECT AND RESEARCH

This study is focused on understanding the experience of new people as they encounter a specific local church family so that the church family may be better equipped to welcome them. Previous chapters established the theological basis for a church's welcome of newcomers by clarifying the attitude we believe God has towards strangers which includes a challenge for Christians to embrace and expand their own hearts in this direction. Then a review of literature related to hospitality and assimilation located the beginning point of WFMC's response to this challenge in the context of the Sunday morning services. This chapter will describe the scope of the study, define and defend the methods used (for example, group discernment and developmental evaluation) and detail the phases and timetable that were used to seek a deeper understanding of the welcome of a local church. I will conclude with a discussion of ethical considerations for this study.

Scope

The scope of the project involved the creation of a research team to interview fourteen newcomers to WFMC in order to better understand their initial experiences with our church. The list of newcomers was drawn from WFMC attendance records from 2009 to 2014, and a purposive sample of different levels

of participation in church programs was selected by the research team. This team then used group discernment techniques to identify themes within the interview data, reflect on their own experiences as interviewers and craft a response: the Welcome: Connect team ministry. After acting on this response for six months, with two group developmental evaluation meetings, the research team was then tasked with follow-up interviews with six initial interview participants who were willing to talk to us again, along with a smaller sample of six newcomers to provide comparison data with our initial round of interviews. Another developmental evaluation session was held during this round of interviews, and followed up with two group discernment sessions where recommendations were made for future application of the study results.

Methodology

In order to discern what methodology would be most helpful, it is first necessary to identify what sort of entity we are working within. It is my contention that a church is a complex, adaptive system (CAS), which necessitates a certain mode of inquiry. To describe what a CAS is, I will define each word in the term. A system is an interrelated group that is more than just the sum of its parts. Peter Senge (1990) gives a helpful example of what a system looks like by describing the water cycle: water evaporates, clouds form, and rain falls. Each of these events are separated by time and space, yet are part of the same overall pattern. He states that a system cannot be completely understood through its

deconstruction into the various parts. It must be considered as a whole (Senge 1990).

For something to be complex means that it is entirely different from simple, or even complicated. Common metaphors that are used to describe these three levels of complexity are: baking a cake (simple), sending a rocket to the moon (complicated), and raising a child (complex) (Westley, Zimmerman, and Patton 2007). A simple task is something that has a limited number of steps or inputs and a reliable consistent outcome. As in baking a cake, if one follows the exact steps laid out in the recipe, the results will be reasonably consistent over time and repetition. Something that is complicated adds more steps, parts and interactions. The difference between sending a rocket to the moon and baking a cake is only one of degree. There are more steps with more parts, which makes a complicated task much more difficult to accomplish successfully. It takes more resources and the stakes of failure are much greater. However, if all of the manifold steps are followed correctly and all of the many parts function as they should, the result is predictable. In both a simple and complicated task, if any one of the significant steps is skipped or followed incorrectly, the desired result is at great risk. A complex task is another thing entirely. It has too many potentialities to keep track of and is therefore inherently unpredictable. Raising a child is more than a matter of following the right steps. Each child is different. Each parent is different. There are myriad interacting factors in the developmental environment of a child and it is almost impossible to predict the precise outcome of all of those interacting factors. That is not to say that the outcomes are completely random,

however. Marion and Uhl-Bien quote Levy who describes this unpredictability as “so many variables... at work in the system that its overall behavior can only be understood as an emergent consequence of the holistic sum of all the myriad behaviours embedded within” (Levy quoted in Marion and Uhl-Bien 2001). In other words, what will happen cannot be known until it does, and no amount of breaking the system down into simpler pieces will help (Wheatley 2006, 132). Prediction within a CAS then becomes more about managing probabilities and close observation than it is about linear certainty regarding cause and effect.

Adaptivity is slightly different from complexity, and adds a different dynamic. Something that is adaptive is not only full of too many variables to keep track of, it also responds to those variables. Adaptivity has been described as “autocatalytic” “order for free” that is seemingly “guided by an unseen hand” (Marion and Uhl-Bien 2001). Slime molds (Brewin 2007) are a good example of complexity that responds to its environment. When resources are abundant, the slime mold is so dispersed that it appears not to exist. However, when resources dwindle, the mold gathers together mote by mote until there is sufficient mass to move to an area of greater prosperity. There is a complex interaction as “each cell in the slime mold sends out signals based on their assessment of the local conditions they are experiencing and these signals are picked up by other nearby cells and then by larger cell clusters” (Dickens 2013) which generates an end result that is far greater than would be gained simply by adding each particle together, and does so without evidence of a central leading influence. Each cell acts on its own in order to generate a corporate result. The self-development of

unpredictable and surprising outcomes “all by themselves” is said to give adaptive systems emergent qualities. This unpredictable ability to adapt to changing environments makes adaptive systems extremely resilient (Wheatley 2006). In the case of groups of people, the response is even more complex and unpredictable because people not only respond to stimuli instinctively, but they also make choices that are driven by a vast array of influences that are not readily apparent nor predictable. The unseen factors can be as shallow as how the weather affects them, or as deep as the relational dynamics of their family of origin. People interact with one another in an infinite variety of means to “mutually adjust their behaviours in ways needed to cope with changing internal and external environmental demands” (Nelson and Dickens 2015, 88).

A local church fits this definition on all three levels. Each church is, first of all, a system. The word church comes from the root word *ekklesia*, which means, simply, an assembly (Coenen 1975). Like any assembly of people, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, as illustrated by the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 12:12-28 when he describes the Church as a Body. Every local church is a complex system. The church is also adaptive because each church is made up of people who have emotional and cognitive responses to the abundance of stimuli they receive each day and they act out their agency in unpredictable and often bewildering ways. All of which clearly makes the task of studying a church tremendously challenging, with implications for how a researcher will approach their task. It also changes how one seeks to lead such an organization, which will be described in chapter 6.

Action Research as an Appropriate Method of Inquiry

The overall framework of this study is provided by Action Research. “Action Research is a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems” (Stringer 2013, 8). It is team-based, action-oriented and seeks beneficial outcomes to all involved. Action research is a journey; a journey that begins by defining a question, which leads to more questions, eventually provoking action. The effects of this action are then reflected upon, which raised more questions and leads to more action. This study sought to begin a team-based cycle of collaborative listening, reflecting and responding that resulted in specific changes that could be evaluated as they developed. Therefore, the overall framework provided by action research is relevant to our approach (Denscombe 2014). Stringer positions action research as appropriate for studying a complex adaptive system when he says that “action research provides the means to systematically investigate and design more effective solutions to the complex array of issues at work in any social setting” (Stringer 2013, 6). His Look/Act/Think spiral provided a helpful heuristic structure for our study (see Figure 2).

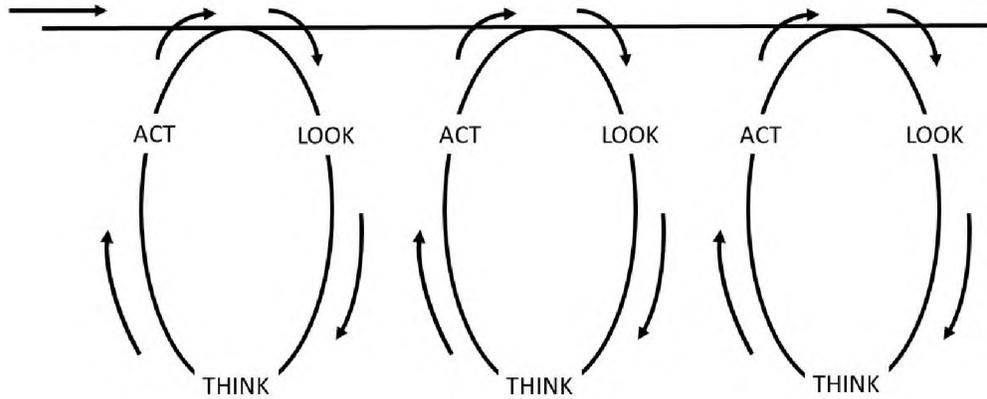


Figure 2. Action Research Interacting Spiral (based on Stringer 2013, 9).

The schedule that was developed in accordance with this framework is as follows:

1. Look 1
 - a. Crafted the research question,
 - b. Project proposal developed and approved.
 - c. Created research tools.
 - d. Trained research team and conducting interviews with round one interviewees.
2. Think 1
 - a. Group discernment – Research team engaged in group reflection and sifting, narrowing the focus to one corporate response strategy for the coming year.
3. Act 1

- a. Research team created a plan (the Welcome: Connect ministry) and implemented it.
 - b. Research team engaged in group developmental evaluation sessions and made mid-course adjustments to the program.
4. Look 2
- a. Research team conducted follow-up interviews with available round one interviewees, and new interviews with round two interviewees.
5. Think 2
- a. Research team reflected on results of second round of interviews, compared with first round, discussed the impact of project on team members, participants and congregation.
6. Act 2
- a. Research team recommended future steps for WFMC.
 - b. Reported to the church family.
 - c. Submitted of final draft of thesis.

Methods

The following methods were used in the study: interviews, group discernment, thematic analysis, and developmental evaluation. In the next section, I provide a description of the tools used and the rationale behind their use.

Sample

The source that was used to generate the lists of potential interview candidates is what WFMC calls “the brown book.” People call it “the brown

book,” because of its brown cover. This is a list of anyone who currently exhibits a semi-regular pattern of attending weekend services at WFMC and is used by ushers to track attendance at weekend services. It is very easy to get on this list: once someone attends four times within a six-month period, their name goes on the list. It is difficult to get off the list. Someone needs to be absent from Sunday services, without contact with the church in any other way, for several years before they are removed. Currently, there are 530 people representing 237 families in the “brown book,” representing the size of the WFMC family in the largest sense of the word. The “brown book” was the source of the most relevant material for this study because it tracks actual behavior relating to attendance. From this list, we selected the potential round one interview participants by determining who first encountered WFMC after 2009, and sorted them into the categories of engaged, connected and disconnected (for a more complete description of these categories, see below, under Project Timetable), in order to seek out people who had a variety of levels of engagement in our church. The round two interview group were selected in the same way, but were limited to those who had come to WFMC since January 2015. This list was then reviewed by the research team to select an appropriate purposive sample for both round of interviews.

Interviews

Interviews were key methods used to gather information at two places in the project. Denscombe suggests that basic information can be gathered in a

survey or questionnaire, but “...when the researcher needs to gain insights into things such as people’s opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences, then interviews will almost certainly provide a more suitable method – a method that is attuned to the intricacy of the subject matter” (Denscombe 2014, 174). In *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, Clark states that interviews “are a common source of qualitative data because they are an effective means to learn from participants about their perceptions of and experiences with a study’s topic” (Clark 2008). Stringer says that action research seeks “to ensure that the ways that stakeholders describe and interpret events become the central focus of the research process” (Stringer 2013, 39). Since it was our desire to become intimately familiar with the details of each person’s relational journey with our church, interviews were chosen as our preferred method of inquiry. The specific type of interview we used would be categorized as a semi-structured interview where “the researcher has a list of questions or fairly specific topics to be covered, often referred to as the interview guide, but the interviewee still has a great deal of leeway in how to reply” (Bryman, Teevan, and Bell 2009, 160).

An interview is not a purely objective method of gathering information. It is an interaction between two or more people, and all are affected in the process. In their chapter “Of Sociology and the Interview,” Benney and Hughes wax poetic as they state, “But the interview is still more than tool and object of study. It is the art of sociological sociability, the game which we play for the pleasure of savouring its subtleties. It is our flirtation with life, our eternal affair, played hard and to win, but played with that detachment and amusement which give us, win or

lose, the spirit to rise up and interview again and again” (Bulmer 1999, 216). As I explained in previous chapters, hospitality or “love of stranger” is at the heart of the life of a church community. Peter Scazzero quotes David Augsburger in *The Emotionally Healthy Church* saying, “Being listened to is so close to feeling loved that for the average person they are indistinguishable” (Scazzero 2010). An interview, then, is not only a tool for allowing someone to tell the complex narrative of their encounter with the church, it is also an expression of genuine hospitality that will impact both participant and facilitator. This is a good example of how action research acknowledges that “nothing can be measured without changing it” (Coghlan and Brannick 2009, 42) and that the act of studying changes the researcher as well. The very act of attentively asking questions, without preparing a response, places the researcher in a position of giving a form of love. Otto Scharmer says, “When I listen deeply, I come to an inner place, where I am full of appreciation for the person I am listening to”(Scharmer 2009, 391). It is to be expected, then, that the results of the interviews will not simply be found in the gathering of information, but also in the relational exchange that takes place during and after the interviews.

The initial and follow-up interview questions (see Appendix 1) were designed with the goal of allowing a newcomer to WMFC to tell the narrative account of their encounters with the church and their response to these encounters. The second phase of interviews included a mix of follow-up interviews (see Appendix 2) and interviews of newcomers that had begun attending Sunday services after the implementation of the Welcome: Connect

team.

Group Discernment

In *Theory U*, Otto Scharmer provides a ten-step framework for diving deep into interview data as a group that allows for supernatural effect as well as clear understanding to emerge (Scharmer 2009, 291–94). The following ten steps are primarily based on his material which guided the process the research team worked through as they examined the interview data. I have modified his steps to include space for silent reflection and prayer, and to incorporate the five-step framework from *Finding Our Way*'s chapter on group discernment entitled “Transforming Aggression into Creativity” (Wheatley 2007, 180–97):

1. Preparation – Everyone prepares by reading the interview transcripts and highlighting phrases, themes and events that stand out for them.
2. Opening – there is an informal sharing of stories and focusing on significant pieces of data. Wheatley calls this stage “Cooling, quieting,” where everyone has an equal chance to share their stories.

Scharmer's thesis is that groups can enter into a process called “Presencing” where they tap into something deeper, something beyond their individual human experience. He talks about an intentional process of “entering in” whereby each group participant sheds their own “knowing” and surrenders to a higher, greater purpose. The goal of this process of surrender is to come into a different state of connecting and being. “When operating from that deeper presence of a future that wants to emerge, you connect to a yet deeper resource of

listening and of intelligence that is available to both human beings and systems – the intelligence of the open will” (Scharmer 2009, 186). In our case, that purpose is God’s purpose for the Church. “By its very nature Christian discernment is a spiritual practice because it is about Spirit – the Spirit of God who is the third person of the Trinity and can be listened to and responded to. Discernment is always a gift given by the Spirit to spiritual people” (Barton 2008, 196). This process of opening is begun at the start of the meeting, and hopefully will permeate all that follows.

After an intentional time of surrender and connecting, there is a time of working through the accounts and emotions of gathering the interview data.

3. Articulate intention and core questions – clarify if change is necessary.

“Why?” and “What?” are key questions to frame a response. This stage would coincide with Wheatley’s “Enriching Opposition” stage, where people are free to take opposing viewpoints and learn from one another that there is more than one possible interpretation,

4. Jamming: Observe, observe, observe – reading selected passages from interviews out loud. This is not about opinions, but rather observations. This is a spontaneous process where one piece of evidence sparks a thought and leads to another piece, allowing a picture or theme to emerge.
5. Sensing from the Field – ideas begin to be grouped around the central question. This stage generates more openness to the idea that we don’t know everything we need to know in order to answer all our questions. As we work through the data, more questions than answers emerge, and this leads to an

essential humility in the face of complexity. Wheatley calls this “Magnetizing.”

6. Essential emergence – this is where essential themes and patterns are allowed to take shape, listening carefully to our intuition and seeking God’s voice within and through the group.

It is in this stage, that the use of silence can help focus beyond our own thoughts and invite God’s supernatural, intuitive voice to speak. “Silence can help us cease striving and rest in God, it can bring calm to the chaos we might be feeling, it can give space for us to deal with our own inner dynamics, and it can help us listen to God – which is often what is most needed at such times” (Barton 2008, 204).

Within the stage of seeking essential themes and patterns, thematic analysis provided an additional procedural grid for sifting through a potentially overwhelming amount of data that resulted from focused interviews with the following steps: “familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report” (Braun and Clarke 2006).

7. Crystallizing – bringing things into sharp focus, locating themes and key supporting quotes. Wheatley identifies this stage as “Precise Destroying” where ideas are allowed to come into focus around one central idea or action, and all extra details are allowed to fall away. This is also a time for identifying obstacles that stand in the way of progress or change, and compassionately planning to address them.

8. Prototyping – testing analysis with a mini-stakeholder session. This is what Wheatley calls “Intelligent Action” where we engage with the existing systems and initiate our plan for change.
9. Presenting and Performing – taking the results of analysis and experimentation to the broader audience.
10. After action review – review, reflect on and document what has been learned.

This theoretical framework provided the foundation for how our research team sifted through the interview data, as well as giving me the basis for all our meeting agendas.

Developmental Evaluation

Developmental evaluation is different from formative and summative evaluation. “Formative evaluations improve the model. Summative evaluations test the model to determine whether it produces the desired outcomes” (Patton 2010, 38), while developmental evaluation responds to the need for ongoing evaluation and adaptation in the midst of action and change. Patton describes the challenge of evaluation when groups “are committed to continuous progress, ongoing adaptation, and rapid responsiveness” (Patton 2010, 41). He suggests that developmental evaluation is particularly well suited to efforts in complex adaptive systems (like the church) because, “Developmental evaluation supports innovation development to guide adaptation to emergent and dynamic realities in complex environments” (Patton 2010, 1). It thus takes into account, even expects, the emergence of unexpected new information and phenomena, allowing

researchers and leaders to act with agility in times of change. Developmental evaluation is also relationship-based, which makes it fit well with the team-based approach we have taken, and the participative nature of action research.

Equipped with the basic frameworks for group discernment (based mostly on Scharmer's work) and developmental evaluation (from Patton), meeting agendas were built with a common logic and progression. Thus, whether we met for the purpose of group discernment or developmental evaluation, the basic flow of our meetings was set up in this way:

Re-engage – using both Scharmer's and Wheatley's ideas of going deeper and letting go of preconceived ideas, the group would always spend time in praying for one another, releasing our personal context and asking God to help us focus solely on the task at hand, while using our life to inform what He brought out in the meeting.

Review – we would always spend time reviewing the road behind, reflecting on the questions and events that had brought us this far.

Relate – we would spend time telling stories of the highs and lows of ministry that we had experienced since our last meeting.

Reflect – as story-telling led naturally into examination of our most recent data, we would notice a shift in energy that would stir up passion and excitement.

Insights would begin to flow, and our discussion usually took unexpected turns.

As best we could, we would attempt to release this energy, creativity and sometimes, frustration, back to God and spend time in silence or reflecting prayer asking Him to show us the way forward.

Respond – we would consider, develop and commit to plans of action between now and the next meeting.

Each meeting would be slightly different as the questions that emerged at each stage of the project were different, depending on whether we were looking, thinking or acting as we moved through the cycles of action research. I would always create the agendas with extra questions and attempt to anticipate the direction our discussions might take us. Every time however, the meeting would be wonderfully and frustratingly different, as ideas and insights emerged from surprising places, leading us down roads we didn't expect to travel. The agendas for the individual meetings are included in Appendix 3.

Project Timetable and Commentary

In this section, I will describe the actions of the study in a chronological narrative format that will include some explanation of data and results in order to show the progression of the study within the context of the adaptive church environment.

Look 1: November 2014 - October 2015

I drafted the Thesis Project Proposal, including Ethical Review, which was approved in July 2015. For this initial proposal, I entitled the project “Beyond First Impressions.” However, during the interviews and in the writing of the initial chapters of the thesis, I came to believe that this study was about more than “First Impressions” and so changed the title of the study to its current name, “Improving Our Welcome.” During the approval and editing process, I recruited a

team of adults from within an existing innovative ministry team called LIFT (Long-term Infrastructure and Facilities Team) to split off and become my Thesis Research Team.

The creation of the proposal led me on a journey from asking, “How do we increase the attendance of our Sunday services and reclaim the momentum of the 1990’s?” through the discovery of “The Wall” and the difficulty newcomers experience getting more involved in our church, to curiosity about the experiences of newcomers to the actual research question: “What is the experience of newcomers to WMFC and how can we improve the way we welcome them into active fellowship?”

The research team assisted me in creating a schedule of open-ended interview questions designed to encourage candid and free-flowing story-telling, along with a consent form that prepared participants for informed participation in the study.

Potential participants were identified from the list of participants in our Sunday morning services called the “brown book,” seeking a purposive sample that represented a cross-section of attendance patterns at WFMC services:

- Engaged - People who have become involved in a ministry team or small group, leading to more regular attendance on Sunday mornings.
- Connected – People who only attend Sunday and feel positively enough about WFMC to call it their church home. This is indicated by their willingness to have their information included in the church directory.

- Disconnected – People who no longer attend and would not describe themselves as part of the WFCM church family.

We believed that these three categories would help us get a well-rounded perspective on how newcomers perceived our church, whether things went really well for them or not. Secondary consideration was given to balancing male and female participants, as well as attempting to hear from people who represented different ethnic and national origins who might otherwise be overlooked.

On June 30, 2015, interview teams were trained in the use of the interview schedule by holding several practice interviews on volunteers from the team itself.

Two-person teams interviewed selected people who were willing and available to be interviewed. Data were collected during interviews through note-taking and audio recordings. The goal was to have twenty or more people interviewed over the summer. The initiation, scheduling and execution of interviews proved more difficult than I ever imagined, and so extended more than a month beyond my initial timetable, thus moving the entire project schedule back, and reducing the number of interviewees to fourteen.

Think 1: November 2015-January 2016.

Researchers met on November 2, 2015 to analyze the interview data in order to identify strengths and weaknesses in WFCM's formal and informal approach to "befriending" newcomers using the overall agenda as described above. A summary of the interview results is provided in Appendix 4. These results became Data Set 1.

As we worked through the agenda of Re-engage, Review, Relate, Reflect and Respond (see Appendix 3 for the detailed agenda), we saw several common patterns that emerged naturally through the telling of stories. Some of the data which supports these themes can be found in Appendix 5.

Church Background – every participant in the interviews had a church background of some kind, and brought with them clear ideas of what they were looking for.

Friendliness – a common first impression was that the WFMC people were friendly to guests, and that the greeters at the door were the source of that impression.

Music – the worship teams created an enjoyable experience for guests.

Preaching – the material given from the pulpit was generally well received.

Time pressure – many of the interview participants indicated a desire to be more involved but had too many other time pressures in their lives.

As we worked through the data, I recorded my observations of the team's reactions in my research journal and these observations became Data Set 2. The team's response to the themes they discerned was a strong desire to overcome peoples' time pressures with a more compelling reason to give priority to church activities, and to help them with developing deeper friendships. In a moment of clarity where the team experienced a sense of inspiration, they came up with the idea of re-imagining and expanding the greeters ministry to become something that went beyond a warm welcome prior to the services. The outcome of this

meeting was for the research team to create a new team called the “Welcome: Connect Team” that would add more people to the greeters ministry, informed and inspired by the experience of the interviews, and that would have an additional focus of helping people make connections to people and WFMC ministries before and after services.

Act 1: January 2016 – September 2016

The research team became the initial foundation for the Welcome: Connect ministry and began to invite others to join them in this ministry, with the official unveiling coming on January 23, 2016, where the ministry was prayed for, and the invitation was extended to interested persons in the congregation to join the team. A prayer that was given to team members as they began their new ministry was: “Lord, help us to welcome every guest as if we were welcoming you, delighting in their presence and ready to learn what good news they bring to us. Amen.”

The team held three developmental evaluation meetings over the course of the year, with an agenda that reflected the same overall movements as described above, but with different relevant questions, as can be seen in Appendix 3. The results of these meetings became Data Set 3.

These developmental sessions evaluated the experience of the research team as they worked in the Welcome: Connect ministry, and sifted through the verbal feedback they received as well. These observations and experiences

became Data Set 4. We observed the following changes occurring within the church family:

- Greater connection and invitation to involvement in children's ministry.
- A sense of excitement and "buzz" in the foyer, where many other people in the congregation either volunteered to be part of the W:C team, or simply took it upon themselves to be volunteer greeters in the foyer.
- Very positive response to the nametags. Almost every team member reported people saying, "What a great idea! We should all have these!" Team members noticed that people unfailingly referred to them by name, and then remembered their names even when they weren't greeting.

The meetings also led to the following adjustments:

- Scheduling – instead of a pre-made schedule, we went with a self-serve schedule where people signed up for weeks that they could be available to serve on the team. By the end of the project, we found that this was actually an ill-advised move, as it led to many gaps in the schedule, and a lack of urgency and commitment to the ministry once the summer hit.
- Emailing names of newcomers to members of W:C team.
- Increased focus on connecting following services, as opposed to welcoming prior to services
- Understanding that an invitation coffee or connection with a relevant ministry person is pivotal in helping someone become connected beyond Sunday morning.

- Creation of a “What do I need to know?” brochure to give people the information they needed to take further steps in connecting, especially to small groups or membership.
- Removal of the Info Booth facilitator & location. Team members found that the booth became a gathering point for regular attenders, and very few newcomers actually came to or were directed to that spot by greeters.
- Targeted integration with small group leaders and the small group potlucks: Due to a happy accident, one of our meetings was scheduled on the same night as a small group leader’s meeting and ideas for further development of both ministries emerged.
- Emerging conversation around the team and the interview process being managed by a pastoral staff member

Look 2: July 2016 – February 2017

It was in July that the Welcome: Connect and research teams encountered a setback. Several team members experienced a change in their circumstances (one became seriously ill, one couple had a baby, others had career changes). These changes resulted in both teams losing some of their members. The Welcome: Connect schedule never recovered a full staffing and continues to the date of publication to be staffed on an informal basis. The research team added several new members at this time in an attempt to continue on with the interviews in a timely fashion.

The research team then re-interviewed four members of the initial sample group, along with six selected newcomers who had come after the beginning of the Welcome: Connect ministry. The re-interview transcripts became Data Set 5, while the second round of initial interviews became Data Set 6. The ongoing difficulty of scheduling and executing interviews necessitated a shift in responsibility and timeline, which provided the basis for some of the recommendations for ongoing ministry responsibility. It was at this point that I realized that we needed another pastoral staff member on the research team in order to make sure our interviews could be arranged and implemented in the time we had available. Pastor Jody Pfeifer joined us in the fall of 2016.

Think 2: February - March 2017

In a two-part final group discernment meeting, the research team once again walked through the basic framework agenda and uncovered the following themes:

- Universal church background –in all of our attempts to reach out to a diverse sampling of our newcomers, there was not one person that didn't have a church background.
- Predisposition is a key factor in determining where people end up; both in who stays with us long term, and who makes it over the wall into further involvement beyond Sunday morning.
- Burden of guilt – most of the participants wanted to be more involved and felt guilty that they weren't.

- Significant positivity regarding our church – after hearing the feedback from our newcomers, the research team was very encouraged by the positive feedback regarding the worship service content, as well as the affirmation of the warmth and responsiveness of our congregation. Second round interviews only intensified what the first round discovered.
- Small groups are significant places for life change at WFMC.
- The influence of the team in stirring up intentional hospitality in the congregation – halo effect in sanctuary, foyer, ministry ideas, and people making relational connections.

Act 2: Recommendations for the Future

This phase was the summarizing and reporting on the results of the study, with recommendations for further action within the WFMC context. The research team suggested that the pastoral staff incorporate intentional interviews as an ongoing key part of our welcome of newcomers, and that the Welcome: Connect team be celebrated, nurtured and supported by intentional investment and ongoing developmental evaluation.

Data Set Summary

The data gathered through the course of this study are summarized in the chart below:

Table 1. Data Set Descriptions

Set #	Description (Number of Participants)	When Collected	Analyzed by:	Analysis Method
1	First Round Initial Interview Transcripts (14)	July 1 – November 1, 2015	Research Team	Group Discernment
2	Research Journal Observations of Research Team and Personal Reactions	November 2014-July 2017	Myself	Personal reflection
3	Group Discernment and Developmental Evaluation Meeting Results (6-10)	November 2, 2015 – February 23, 2016	Myself	Personal Reflection
4	Observations and Experiences of Research Team Members (10)	November 2, 2014 – March 31, 2017	Research Team	Developmental Evaluation
5	Second Round Follow-up Interview Transcripts (4)	July 1, 2016 – February 28, 2017	Research Team	Group Discernment
6	Second Round Initial Interview Transcripts (6)	July 1, 2016 – February 28, 2017	Research Team	Group Discernment

Ethical Considerations

The goal of the following definitions and procedures was to guard both participants and researchers from the consequences of poor or harmful project design, pursuing the ideal of honouring the worth and dignity of each person while seeking to expand our understanding (Bell 2010, 47).

Fairness and Equity

With regards to equal fairness and equity, purposive sampling was the primary criteria determining the selection of interviewees. Thus, priority was given to selecting participants who represent the various responses to WFMC Sunday Services. Secondly, researchers attempted to choose participants that

proportionally represented a cross-section of people who have been visitors to WFMC Sunday services since 2009 in other ways, such as: age, gender, ethnicity, economic standing and country of origin. This balance intentionally opened the study to those who might otherwise be overlooked due to racial, economic or gender bias within the research team.

Protection of Information and Minimal Risk

In terms of risk, the main area of concern lay in confidentiality. In the context of this study, the distinction between “confidentiality” and “anonymity” given by Bell quoting Sapsford and Abbot is a useful one: “*confidentiality* is a promise that you will not be identified or presented in identifiable form, while *anonymity* is promise that even the researcher will not be able to tell which responses came from which respondents” (Bell 2010, 49).

Since interviewees were asked for their candid reflections on their experience at WFMC, names and identifying characteristics had to be stripped from quotes and from any other information shared publicly in order that their identities remained confidential; thus protecting them from any negative consequences of sharing their honest opinions.

Each interviewee was identified with a number. Publication of information gained from interviews will refer to participants by these numbers. We stripped quotes, observations or testimonies of identifying marks that would break participants’ anonymity.

The raw data (interviewee lists, notes, and audio recordings) gathered in

the interviews was kept in a secure location in digital form by the lead researcher. Interview recordings, transcripts and notes will be kept for one year following the study, at which time they will be destroyed.

Should a connection be made between a person and their confidential opinion, participants were at risk of damage to their social relationships which could potentially affect them economically as well as psychologically. However, this risk did not exceed “minimal risk” that people would experience in their usual decisions to participate or not participate in our church programs (Canadian. Institute of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada 2010).

Participants in the study may choose to have their name attached to specific quotes that are published if they so choose. Interviewees were offered the opportunity to receive an advance copy of the results of the research before it was presented to the congregation, or a copy of the finished thesis.

Informed Consent

The process of gathering informed consent began with an overall summary of the study and the permissions requested were given in the initial contact, either by phone or email. Secondly, a document based on a template provided by Health Canada (Health Canada 2004) was sent to them two weeks prior to the interview, outlining the potential risks and benefits, the strategies for protecting confidentiality and the intent to eventually publish the findings of this study (see

Appendix. 6). This form was signed and received before the interview began.

Between receiving the informed consent document and the interviews, a YouTube video containing a summary of the project and addressing frequently asked questions (FAQs) was made available to participants. They were given the opportunity to meet with a member of their interview team prior to the interview if they wished.

Participants were informed that they would not be specifically targeted by the programs or changes their input may generate. However, they might be part of the general population that is invited to participate. The consent form gave them the choice to opt out of any further invitation or communication from WFMC if they wished. Participants were also able to opt out of the study at any time, with no negative consequences (Bell 2010, 54–60).

Conflict of Interest

Action research is, by nature, a collaborative, integrative mode of asking and answering questions. It is therefore essential to identify the position and background of the researcher prior to the beginning of the project in order to establish the bias that they bring to the project. Coghlan and Brannick introduce this concept when they quote Joan, an insider action researcher seeking ethical approval as saying, “What I am seeking approval for is what I do every day” (Coghlan and Brannick 2009, 135). I had the same thought, since this project is directly tied to a question I have been asking in my every day work since 2009, which I discussed in chapter 1. This brings up the issue of conflict of interest – it

is very difficult to be both an invested, passionate pastoral leader and a dispassionate objective observer at the same time. Coghlan and Brannick identify this when they quote Brydon-Miller and Greenwood in making a distinction between the work of research, which coincides with my everyday work, and the reporting of the research and results for publication or academic credit (Coghlan and Brannick 2009, 136). As the lead researcher of this project and also Lead Pastor of WFMC, there was an ongoing interaction between these two roles. Some of the tensions that arose in the course of the study were:

- Leading the interviews: If the pastor and lead researcher performed the interviews, it would be more convenient and within my control. However, some might not have felt free to be completely honest if they had critiques or affirmations directed specifically at me as Lead Pastor. With this in mind, we decided to have members of the research team to facilitate the interviews.
- In the process of interviewing participants in church ministry about their opinions and experiences therein, information could have surfaced that either challenged me personally or revealed pastoral concerns in someone's life. It was decided that compassion would dictate that the needs of the individual for safety, comfort, encouragement and healing will override the needs of the study to complete the interview, get good data or stay on schedule.
- After our initial round of interviews and prior to the analysis of the overall data, some of us had emotional responses to different needs that seemed to come from one or two interviews. It was a challenge to our restraint not to

immediately jump in and try to fix perceived problems before the group had a chance to evaluate the big picture of the interview data as a team.

- I could take the opinions of the interviewees personally. This required self-control on my part to keep my ego at bay, receive feedback in an objective sense and not allow it to change my personal ministry investment in anyone one way or the other.
- Informing participants and church family about the progress and results of the project. A timetable was laid out for each interviewee, and they were given options as to how they wanted to be informed. We decided to release some of our reflections to the congregation prior to the implementation of the Welcome: Connect Team in order to justify the actions that we took in response to the first round of interviews, and then release our findings when the study was complete.
- We took several steps were to ensure that any potential harm to interview participants would be minimized in order to protect their ability to share their unguarded, honest opinions. First of all, participants were assured that there would be no direct consequences to them based on their responses to the questions. Secondly, their confidentiality was carefully guarded. Thirdly, questions were worded in such a way as to allow for freedom of judgement as they simply told their stories.

Being both researcher and leader in this church meant that at least some of the responsibility to respond to study data rested with me. Despite the self-protective

desire to focus on issues outside of my own attitudes and behavior, there was every likelihood that I would need to change how I approached my own role in order to bring desired changes to the church. To minimize these conflicts, we chose a team approach to every aspect of the study: we evaluated the data together, chose a course of action democratically through a vote, and practiced developmental evaluation together as a team.

There were several other principles we used as guides when issues arose. These included an ongoing commitment to the value of all people as beings created in the Image of God, deserving of fairness, equality and the highest level of dignity and respect. This means, for example that we kept the information of all people involved confidential, maintained the security of all data gathered through the interviews, meetings and reflections of all participants, and the immediate declaration of any conflicts of interest. Throughout the project, I was also explicitly open to be challenged or corrected by any member of the research team should they perceive any violations of these or any other principle which puts the project ahead of the needs of the people and the church family as a whole.

Conclusion

This chapter has laid out an understanding of the complex adaptive nature of a church to support the use of an action research approach to this project. The tools of interviewing, group discernment and developmental evaluation were described and justified as effective means of gathering and sifting data. A summary and narrative account of the project timetable were presented, along with a table of the

sets of data that were generated in the process. Finally, this chapter detailed ethical considerations that were taken into account in the course of the research project. The conclusions that were drawn as a result of this course of research are contained in chapter five.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCOVERIES AND OUTCOMES

This study has focused on understanding the experience of new people as they encounter a specific local church family and equipping the church family to welcome them more effectively. The previous chapter revealed the journey of the research team's growing understanding of the experiences of newcomers and their response to the challenges newcomers face. This chapter will collect the discoveries that the team made in the combined rounds of interviews regarding the predisposition of newcomers, the impact of the interview process on both candidate and interviewer, outcomes from the implementation of the Welcome: Connect ministry program, and final recommendations from the research team to the WFMC congregation. A summary chart of interview results can be found in Appendix 4, and the table of data sources can be found in chapter four.

There were four areas of learning through this study: predetermining factors, the impact of interviews, the effect of the Welcome: Connect team, and the price of intentional hospitality. We were led to a greater appreciation of the spiritual depth and awareness that newcomers bring with them to their first encounter with our church, finding that newcomers have given more thought to their spiritual choices and approached church as more informed participants than we had expected. The speed and depth of their participation in our church family

life had more to do with their existing lifestyle and their reasons for coming to church than it had to do with the response of the church to them. The interviews helped participants reflect more deeply on their spiritual journey, while also facilitating a relational connection between interviewer and interviewee. Giving the gift of attentive listening likely influenced interviewees to be more positive than they would have been initially. Despite the effect that the limitations newcomers brought with them to church had on their eventual level of engagement, the results of the Welcome: Connect ministry were that newcomers participated in WFCM ministries beyond the Sunday service more easily and more quickly than in prior years. The actions of the Welcome: Connect team raised awareness of the importance of hospitality within the congregation. We also learned that intentional hospitality requires significant and ongoing investment to maintain. There was also a significant impact on my own leadership perspective and habits, but these will be dealt with in chapter six.

Predetermining factors

The first discoveries I would like to relate were the most unexpected for me as a researcher, and revealed blind spots in my perspective. Strangers in the Bible are usually portrayed as having straightforward and obvious needs. Those who seek to love strangers in our own context can be guilty of assuming that we know what people want or need based on how we perceive them. These interviews (Data Sets 1, 5, 6) provided significant and surprising insights into the predisposition of newcomers to our church. As a pastor, my connection with

people often begins with their initial visit to a church service. These interviews challenged me to think more thoroughly about what happens prior to that moment. What motivates people to come to church in the first place, what they are looking for and what they intend once they find it, are all aspects of a person's spiritual journey that are mostly formed before they come to church on a Sunday morning. At the same time, we found in the interviews that the attitudes people come with largely determine whether they stay or not and how involved they get.

What Newcomers Came With

One of the most common trends in our interview data was that every single person in our sample had a church background of some sort. All of them reported memories of attending church while growing up (Data Set 1, 6). This was a very different perspective than I had presumed. My assumption was that there was a good chance that many of the people in our services did not know the gospel message, and were unfamiliar with a church context. What we discovered is that while they were new to our context, church and Christianity were nothing new to them. One couple said simply, "We were ready to go to church" (Data Set 1).

We then reflected on the demographics of Weyburn, and asked: "Just how many people have a church background in our city?" The 2011 census results show that of the 10,155 people living Weyburn, 7,600 identified as Christian, while 2,420 identified as "no religious affiliation" (Statistics Canada, 2013). This changes the challenge of offering intentional hospitality within our context in

several ways. First of all, people with a church history come to a church service with expectations built on what they remember. They are not a blank slate. They are coming as informed consumers, and will either carry apprehensions that they will need to overcome, or expectations that a church will have to live up to. One participant described the walk across the parking lot from their vehicle to the church doors as “the longest walk I take all week.” This person, and others like her, deeply appreciated the gentleness and friendliness of the greeters to help them overcome their fears. In contrast, several other participants mentioned how our church made them feel at home because it was so similar to the church they used to attend in another city.

We learned through the interviews that almost all of the newcomers who were looking for a church home had also moved to Weyburn within the past year or two (Data Set 1,6). This was encouraging for the pastors to hear - that we are not a church that is engaged in “sheep stealing” from other congregations in Weyburn.

Secondly, this understanding of our ministry context has begun permeating our entire approach to outreach. As I observed the reactions of the research team to the interview data (Data Set 2), I saw that this information changed what evangelism meant to them. All of us had been approaching evangelism with a somewhat confrontational and missionary-like stance, assuming that new people to the church and the people living in Weyburn had little knowledge of the gospel, and were antagonistic towards both Jesus and church. What our interviews showed us and Weyburn demographics confirmed, is

that the vast majority of people around us have more church experience, and likely think more deeply about their spiritual lives than we generally believe.

One woman reported being on a search for a faith that belong to her, instead of living off the faith of her parents:

For myself, probably when I was first going to University is kinda when I was looking for my own faith so I left my parents church in search of a different church. Umm. I don't think my opinions towards church in general changed but maybe just was seeking something a little bit different. (Data Set 1)

Another reflected on what brought him to church:

I don't think you need to go to church to have Christianity. I think faith is what brings you there and the good works are not going to get you into heaven no matter how hard you are trying. But I think what the family of church life does for us is keep us on the path and gives us strength from other people. And we tend to waver, that's life. We tend to waver all the time and maybe when you're weak, you and me will be strong, and you can sort of pick me up when I'm stumbling. And you don't have that support unless you go to church. (Data Set 1)

One woman who had been less involved with church growing up still reported a significant depth of spirituality:

I've always been a spiritual person, I've become more spiritual since I've been involved with the church here. And with the death of my mom too. I felt I got closer to God. (Data Set 1)

Clearly there is more going on than appears on the surface. In our meetings, I observed that for our research team (Data Set 2), evangelism began to look a lot more like attentive hospitality in everyday life, and especially in the church foyer. Love of the stranger began by appreciating that strangers are not that different from us. People are living out spiritual stories and many would be deeply grateful

for the chance to share it with a skilled listener who can ask good facilitating questions. Instead of telling people the gospel story, and trying to convince them to see things our way, the results of our interviews have challenged us to spend our time and energy looking and listening for evidence of God's prevenient activity and celebrating it together with others.

What Newcomers Are Looking For

A recurring phrase that many of our interview participants used (Data Sets 1, 5, 6) was, "we were looking for a home church." Three of the five people who currently have very little contact with our church family are also three of the four people who did not use the phrase. Almost everyone who continues in regular involvement with our church said in their interviews that they were looking for a spiritual home. The one exception who did not use the phrase still specifically pointed out that she was interested in participating in church life, but that it wasn't as big of a priority for her as it was for her parents. "I think as you move out of your parent's house... it's not that my view changed about church, like not liking it or anything, but it just wasn't a first priority, some of what my parents always had it as" (Data Set 1).

The only couple that was looking for a home church and have since moved to a different church reflected that they didn't find certain specific things they were looking for in our ministry practice.

"We felt that what was being taught on Sunday morning was being geared towards a very brand-new believer from week to week, and there wasn't enough in-depth substance to learn and grow from at our stage of walk, at

our experienced stage of faith” (Data Set 1).

They reported good feelings towards our church and the people involved. Once again, these were preexisting factors that they brought with them through our doors.

The blind spot that this revealed to me that I recorded in my research journal (Data Set 2) is that I am often trying to reach out to people who aren't looking for anything new in their lives, seeking to convince them to join our church. As our relationship deepens and we share on a spiritual level, they are often very interested in learning more about my personal faith and how it could be of interest or benefit to them. Often these people make a change in their own faith orientation, or use insights I share with them to intensify their own spiritual search. The frustration I experience is that most of the time, they are not interested in joining with others on this journey – they have little interest in going to church. The interview results revealed that the people who are most likely to walk through the doors of a church are people who have already decided that they want to participate in church life to some extent. Personally, this has challenged me to offer my evangelistic hospitality with a more open agenda, seeking to love strangers without attempting to convince them to join anything.

Many of the newcomers who are most deeply engaged in WFMC church life also reported that they had difficult or unpleasant encounters within our church context that they had to push through to get more deeply connected and involved. Despite the almost universal observation that WFMC is a “friendly,

welcoming church,” every single person reported a need to step out and take initiative before being able to get more deeply involved (Data Set 1, 6). They told us the following:

“Having small children made it more difficult” (Data Set 1).

“there was a lot for us to adapt to, the language barrier was one thing” (Data Set 1).

“Infant baptism for us was a struggle” (Data Set 1).

“It was quiet! It was different from what I was used to... What I was accustomed to was free flow... you don’t speak in tongues, you don’t clap, you don’t sing, you don’t dance... but we were just looking for a place to worship” (Data Set 1).

“I do just find it hard to get to groups all the time... I actually don’t really know what small groups there are” (Data Set 6).

They did so because they had already chosen, prior to coming, that they were going to become a part of this particular group of people. In their words,

“My past church experience is based around the idea of small group fellowship... so I was very happy to have that opportunity to the same thing here” (Data Set 1).

“No one asked me, I just decided I would, and I volunteered” (Data Set 1).

“I just wanted to get involved” (Data Set 1).

“It’s always in my heart, I don’t want to be a Sunday Christian” (Data Set 1).

“We were very excited about the young people we could get involved with” (Data Set 6).

Newcomers to WFMC seem to have already determined that they want to be part of WFMC before they even walk through the doors.

What Newcomers Are Available For

A second blind spot that was revealed to our research team is that lack of involvement does not indicate lack of desire. In our analysis of round one interviews (Data Set 1), we as a group were seeking to understand what could help people get more involved in our church family. From the church side, we have focused on good communication, accessible options for involvement, and the importance of personal invitations to help people get involved. When we see good people being less engaged than we hope, we believe our invitations are insufficient, or chalk it up to lack of interest on the peoples’ part. Our interviews showed that neither of these beliefs is correct.

In almost every interview (Data Sets 1,6), research team members heard people say that they wanted to be more involved. Regardless of their level of participation (even those who have not attended services in over a year), almost everyone said, “I would like to be more involved but...” (Data Set 1,6). Many people mentioned specific programs they were interested in and most could cite at least one personal invitation they had received and had to decline for various reasons. All the reasons for not being more involved were personal: lack of time,

more pressing priorities, family obligations, and work schedule. Those who were not very involved in church programming and church relational life wanted more. One person, when talking about the challenges of being a single parent, poignantly mourned their inability to participate more:

“I miss them because a big part of my growth as a Christian was a core group, so and I’ve been very involved before and I’ve benefitted from it, and I’ve also made a contribution. I really miss it.” (Data Set 1)

Other reported being aware of, and invited to be a part of, other opportunities:

“There were lots of opportunities available, it was more just me not having the time” (Data Set 1).

“A lot of the things I was interested in attending, I just found that I didn’t have the time” (Data Set 1).

“There was always opportunity. They would mention that to everybody; all are welcome...but that’s not my goal...now I just sit back and enjoy” (Data Set 1).

“The church is there and it is available for me, I just have to make myself more of a commitment” (Data Set 1).

“I do get frustrated at myself, and part of it is due to a mismanagement of time” (Data Set 6).

Level of involvement did not correspond with level of desire. This finding can motivate church leaders to work harder at creating flexible opportunities for people to get involved according to their own schedule.

Another blind spot that was revealed is that lack of involvement does not equal lack of devotion, as you can see in the above quotes. People within the thick of church life face the temptation to measure spiritual devotion based on church participation. One member of the research team was deeply touched by the thoughtfulness and sincerity of every person they interviewed (Data Set 2). These people were, without exception, sincere people who shared the same beliefs and passions that she herself did, but who, for various reasons, do not engage as deeply in church life.

Our research team observed (Data Set 2) that sincere devotion, combined with an inability to act on their desire to be more involved resulted in a burden of guilt. Several times, our interviewers were unable to maintain their objective interviewer stance and ended up comforting interview participants as they shared the intensity of their desire to be more involved, their struggles with the limitations of their lives, and their deep desire to live a life that was pleasing to God. As one who has been tempted to use guilt as a recruitment strategy, I found this very convicting. What I heard in the interviews were the stories of people who desperately wanted to say yes to opportunities but were unable to do so and thus were carrying an increasing sense of guilt and God's judgement.

Understanding the strength of these predetermining factors was not as discouraging as one might imagine. It provided clarity around what a church family can and cannot control in a newcomer's journey towards God and church involvement. It removed some of the burden of guilt from the members of WFMC

in that the large numbers of people who visit and don't stay at our church may be due mostly to the fact that they never intended to stay. On the other hand, it clearly indicated that our responsibility is to have a heart of hospitable welcome to absolutely every person we encounter on a Sunday morning. As one of our research team members remarked, unaware that they were echoing the words of Gary McIntosh, "Everyone needs to be a greeter" (McIntosh 2006, 117).

The Impact of Interviews

Interviews were the chosen means of gathering information because of the desire to go deep into the complexity of a person's journey towards God, faith and church engagement.

Increased Empathy and Motivation

The impact that interviews had which was first evident to me showed up even before we conducted the first official interviews. In our training sessions where we gave the questions a test run and practiced on each other, it was immediately evident to me that as the interviewers and note-takers listened attentively to someone's spiritual journey, they were captivated by the ups and downs, the courage and heartache that they were privy to. Many of us felt an unction to immediately address flaws in our church life once we heard the stories behind the struggle (Data Set 2).

As the interviews progressed, there was a perceptible growth in the urgency that the research team members were feeling about the needs of newcomers to our church. The Welcome: Connect team initiative was a direct

expression of the compassion and concern that the members of our research felt for people who were walking into an unfamiliar environment and wanted to connect with God and other people. (Data Set 3, Appendix 5)

Interview team members reported (Data Set 4) that following the interviews, when they encountered interview participants in church or on the street, they were motivated to make contact and check in with how they were doing. There was an easy sense of friendship that was established by listening to someone else's story. This was especially evident at Sunday services, where both interviewers and interviewees reported looking forward to seeing each other again. The second round of interviews (Data Set 5) showed a marked increase in comfort and familiarity – one couple even got together for dinner before their second interview. Research team members reported changing where they sat on Sunday mornings due to the new relational connections that they had, and during the greeting time during services, found themselves walking all over the sanctuary in an effort to touch base with their new friends.

This empathy has ebbed and flowed as life has gotten more busy and complicated, but the testimony of our team members (Data Set 4), as well as the people who were re-interviewed (Data Set 5) is that they have become more aware of, and more concerned about the needs of *all* the people who attend Sunday services, but especially those who are new. The spirit of hospitality was fed by experiencing our church through the eyes and ears of a newcomer.

Another side benefit of asking people about their own experience as a newcomer is that it made them more mindful of the fact that there were other people having similar experiences each week. One participant said that she makes a conscious effort to remember how she felt when she first came in, and to look for others who might be feeling the same way (Data Set 5). In this way, being interviewed actually motivated one newcomer to be more hospitable to other newcomers.

Mutual Connection

The increase in empathy and motivation was not a one-way street. Re-interview participants (Data Set 1,5,6) reported gratitude for how the interviews had opened the door to new friendships that they would otherwise never have established. Several of the interview connections were across generational lines and in five cases, ethnic lines as well. Interview participants reported that just being asked to be part of an interview showed them that the church considered them as part of the family, and that their opinions mattered. They felt valued and special, and thus more connected to the church family as a result.

The Gift of Listening

These benefits point to the value of simply spending time listening. The intentional attentiveness of the interview environment showed participants that their opinions and their history are important to their church family. The sheer gift of spending an hour listening to someone else's story seems to have had a significant impact. The research team affirms that they were witness to this,

repeatedly (Data Set 4). This theme of listening being equal to loving continues to emerge. This mutual connection provides a possible explanation for the strongly positive feedback we received in the interviews. When given the gift of intentional, non-defensive attentiveness, it is very likely that even a hostile participant would make an effort to be positive and affirming in the face of such a valuable gift, generating a bias towards positivity. We shouldn't have been surprised by this, but we were.

The Value of Reflection

Another impact that participants observed regarding the interviews (Data Set 5) is that the questions that were asked prompted reflection on their faith journey and their interaction with the church in ways that otherwise would not have happened. After one of our practice interviews (Data Set 4), a research team member remarked, "I really had never seen myself as an active participant in my relationship with the church before. I have more of a responsibility than I thought!" The second round of interviews (Data Set 5) invited people to think about the impact of the interviews and they responded in similar fashion, reporting that the interviews were like "nudges" – gentle reminders that church and their spiritual journey mattered. Another participant shared how reflecting on her journey reminded her of times in her life where she had been more passionate, and how she wanted to get back to that kind of passionate engagement.

In discussing the value of this gift of listening and reflecting, the research team was moved to think about how they could more intentionally facilitate

reflecting on one's story in various ways throughout the discipleship journey at WFMC (Data Set 2). We saw that there are many times that we use interviews and story-telling as a regular part of our church life, and that we could celebrate these and make more of them when we have the chance. Some examples are: in small group life, at the beginning of a new group, members are encouraged to tell the "how they got here" story; in membership and leadership nomination processes, people are interviewed about their faith journey and their growth in leadership; in our mentoring groups, there is a very intense, no-holds-barred story-telling time where each member comes clean about their past struggles. Our team saw that more value could be released from these times through intentionally building the interview structure around similar movements to what was used in this study.

The Welcome: Connect Experiment

As mentioned in chapter four, the outcome of the group discernment reflection (gathered in Data Set 3) on the transcripts from the initial round of interviews (Data Set 1) was the re-imagining of a greeting team that not only sought to welcome people to Sunday services, but also tried to make it easier for people to connect more deeply with the church family. The goal of the Welcome: Connect team flowed directly out of the Biblical themes of intentionally loving the stranger in our midst, and affected the hearts of team members, newcomers and congregation members alike.

Team Members Connect

One of the first things that Research team members discovered (Data Set 3, 4) when they put on the Welcome: Connect nametag is how much easier it was to meet and get to know people. Team members who were newer to the church felt far more connected to the entire church family as they stood at the doors and welcomed absolutely everyone who came in. They were set free from their own awkwardness about approaching strangers, and could introduce themselves without fear of coming across as forward or pushy.

Church Family Engagement

Immediately following the launch of the Welcome: Connect team, there was a surge of people from within the congregation asking to join this new team, (Data Set 4) almost as if there was a pent-up desire to reach out to newcomers that lacked an outlet. Another common piece of feedback team members received was the response to the nametags. Almost everyone coming through doors would read the nametag, call the greeter by name, and say “That’s a great idea!” Many people would follow that comment with, “We should *all* have nametags!”

In the first six months of the launch, team members reported that people would spontaneously comment that the energy in our foyer had become more friendly and happy. This sense continues, but as a “new normal” has been established, it draws fewer comments. One person in their second interview (Data Set 5) noted that people were more willing to go beyond, “Hi, how are you?” in their conversations with her in the foyer.

Pastoral and worship team members have observed a change in our greeting time during church services (Data Set 2). Prior to this study, people would largely shake hands with the people in their immediate vicinity in the sanctuary. The greeting time was a happy, relaxed time where people appeared comfortable and genuinely happy to see one another. After the initiation of the Welcome: Connect team, team members reported (Data Set 4) that they saw people walking all the way across the room to greet others. At our developmental evaluation meetings (Data Set 3), research team members reported doing this themselves to make sure to greet people they had interviewed and say hello.

Halo effect

The goal of only engaging in one intentional response to the interview data was to provide a somewhat measurable baseline to measure before and after. However, due to the nature of the church as a CAS, we observed other spontaneous beneficial changes to the church life in the same time period (Data Set 3); a halo effect which seemed stimulate positive changes around the one change we were making. It seemed that as we asked questions, talked about the project and did church life together, we would stir up new kinds of energy and ideas that would spark something new in others. The discussions that led up to the initiation of this study took place in the context of a complex adaptive system, and spawned other initiatives. One of the major projects that was undertaken concurrently with the study was the analysis of the needs of the congregation with regards to the building, and a five phase, multi-year renovation of the entire

church building began. Alongside the launch of the Welcome: Connect team, there was a resurrection of our WFMC women's ministry which resulted in monthly relationship-building events. The small group ministry also decided to start monthly potlucks around the same time, that were designed to build relationships with newcomers and make it easier for people to invite others to their small groups. These other programs may have been contributing factors that enhanced the positive results that we observed over the past year at WFMC that are described in the next section.

Newcomers Connect and Commit

According to internal church statistics, in the ten years prior to 2016, WFMC would welcome an average of four new families each year that would become engaged in church life beyond Sunday morning services. First, they would have to get over "The Wall" at the 6-8 month mark, and then would usually take two years to really settle in to a consistent pattern of involvement. They would either join a small group, or take part in a ministry team on a regular basis. These people were the most likely to become an enduring part of our church family over the years. In 2016, we recorded eight families that did the same thing, and the time they took to do so was less than a year. While our interview results would point out that most of these people probably intended to make WFMC their church home before they came in, and that their past history and personal lives are what gave them the freedom to get involved beyond Sunday morning, the dramatic difference between 2016 and the seven years previous points to the fact

that the process of getting more deeply connected seems to be easier than it was before. This is a positive outcome worth celebrating.

The Price of Intentional Hospitality

One of the disheartening things about this process has been the discovery of how much effort and time true hospitality costs. Christine Pohl says, “Hospitality will never be free from difficulty, but to sustain the practice, it is crucial to consider the well-being of hosts as well as guests. It is here that we quickly encounter struggles with limits and boundaries because physical and emotional strength, space, food and other resources are finite” (Pohl 1999, 128). In our case, the most finite resources seemed to be time and motivation. The interviews were difficult to get done and awkward to initiate. By the time it came around to doing the second round, many of us were tired and had difficulty getting motivated to tackle it again. The length of time it took to complete sufficient interviews set back the project timeline several months. Team members reported difficulty in arranging the schedules of several people in order to connect. “Lack of urgency” was also a significant factor delaying interviews. As the leader of a team of volunteers, I was reluctant to harangue or nag people, yet the team reported that when I set clear deadlines and clearly assigned responsibilities, they were able to respond within the timetable required. The research team believes deeply in the value of these interviews and recommends that they become the major focus of our newcomer outreach strategy. However, with the difficulties mentioned above in mind, the research team recommends that

a pastoral staff member be assigned the responsibility for selecting interview participants, initiating contact, and inviting interview team members to join in, and that this staff member be unapologetic in recruiting and assigning responsibilities to this very beneficial practice.

The Welcome: Connect team began with great commitment and excitement, and yet when summer came there was a dearth of greeters at the doors of the church. Life intruded with significant illnesses, deaths, births, vacations and surgeries, and on and on. Consistent scheduling continues to be a concern. Removing the Information Booth from the equation has helped somewhat, but is not a complete solution. Our research team recommends that a team leader be assigned responsibility for scheduling, recruiting and training team members – this may require a pastoral staff member to take on the task until a suitable person be found. One of the ideal means of training a new Welcome: Connect team member is to take them along on an interview.

Summary of Findings

There were four main themes in the findings from our study: predetermining factors, the impact of interviews, the effect of the Welcome: Connect team, and the price of intentional hospitality. First, the discovery of so many determining factors that are set prior to a person ever encountering a church provides an opportunity to place responsibility accurately. Church leaders and church members can't change what has happened prior to people coming, what they are looking for, or what they are initially available to be involved in.

Therefore, the parable of the sower and the seed, found in Matthew 13, Mark 4 and Luke 8, has a powerful lesson for us: we may not be able to determine the type of soil our seed lands on, but we can determine to make the most of the fertile soil we encounter. It is our responsibility and joy to stir up a heart of hospitality within our context so every time we encounter a newcomer, our prayer will be, “Lord, help us to welcome every guest as if we were welcoming you, delighting in their presence and ready to learn what good news they bring to us. Amen.”

Secondly, there is great value in intentionally giving the gift of a listening ear to a newcomer. Yes, there is a cost and there are obstacles to overcome, but the value of the information a church can receive is hard to overestimate. There is further benefit in generating increased empathy, relational connection, and reflecting on one’s spiritual journey.

Third, the effect of the Welcome: Connect team has resonated with the insights gained through the foundational research in prior chapters of the thesis. In chapter two, I quoted Henri Nouwen as he pointed out that “Hospitality...means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy” (Nouwen 1986, 71). In chapter three, I cited Gary McIntosh, who pointed out that making our space intentionally welcoming to guests is very important. We have been able to identify that our foyer prior to and following services is the focal point for creating this type of free space. The research team provided valuable feedback regarding the shape of our foyer space,

and has also observed the difference between welcoming someone as they come into the church, headed for the worship service, and as they leave the church, having been impacted by the worship and sermon, and are looking for a way to act on what has challenged them in the service. The time immediately following the worship service was a neglected yet pivotal time for intentionally assisting people to get connected relationally. The entire congregation is visibly more engaged and empowered for the task of welcoming strangers. Thus, even if it is difficult to draw a definite cause/effect relationship between the initiation of the Welcome: Connect team and the increase of families connecting to the church, we can say that an intentional team effort to understand the specific journeys of our newcomers has resulted in a changed church environment that is more receptive to those who wish to connect. Our heart of hospitality has expanded. For that, we give thanks.

Conclusion

In this study, we have discovered that God's desire and mandate is for His people to reflect His loving, hospitable heart in their personal and corporate lives. As a team of people intentionally sought to better understand and respond to the needs and desires of newcomers, the atmosphere of Sunday services has changed, and people have been more readily welcomed into fellowship. The hospitable welcome that WFMC gives to newcomers has benefitted from focusing on a hospitable response to newcomers due to the predetermining factors a newcomer brings with them, an ongoing investment in listening to newcomers' stories

through facilitated interviews, and constant development of the Welcome: Connect Ministry. In the final chapter of this thesis, I will focus on the effect that facilitating this study had on me as the Lead Researcher.

CHAPTER SIX: EMERGING LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

This study has been an action research project focused on understanding the experience of new people as they encounter a specific local church family so that the church family may be more motivated and better equipped to welcome them. Chapter Five outlined the discoveries and outcomes of the project as related to the research team, newcomers and congregation. However, it remains to be considered if the research project had any effect on the researcher. Action Research has been described as insider research. Coghlan and Brannick state that “a critical feature of action research is how you learn about yourself in action as you engage in...inquiry” (Coghlan and Brannick 2009). Through the journey of facilitating this study, I have experienced a revolution in my leadership practices. This final chapter discusses the impact of this study on me as a leader and suggests some new leadership practices for those who desire to lead effectively within complex adaptive systems such as a local church.

The Leadership Paradigm Shift

My previous understanding of the nature of the church as an organization could be described as linear and mechanistic (Marion and Uhl-Bien 2001; Wheatley 2006, 138). I had come to believe that it was the pastoral leader’s role

to receive the God-given “correct” vision for the church and then through the proper application of leadership skills and behaviours, systematically motivate and move the group towards that end. My experience in attempting to live out that paradigm was neither successful nor enjoyable. According to this paradigm, what was missing was always my fault: either I had not found the right vision, or I wasn’t a good enough leader to convince and move people towards it. I had been trying to make a factory produce a product (a complicated, non-adaptive mechanistic task) and the complex adaptive system called the church didn’t respond the way my paradigm said that it should have. In approaching this project, I began with the desire to change the church I lead. I wanted to find a way to help it to grow. I wanted to uncover what was holding this healthy church family back and fix it, pointing the way towards a better future.

The initial paragraphs of theological reflection in chapter two reflected my own swings between the extremes of church growth and missional pursuits where I sought to fix the church, either by making it grow, or by making the people more missional. Either way, my attempts reflected both hubris and a simplistic understanding both of my leadership role and the nature of the church. The conclusion of chapter two, that a motivation based on love of strangers bridged the gap between the two extremes. However, without the new insights I had gained about leading emergent change, my efforts would have been focused once again on fixing the church, rather than asking questions and responding together to the results. In the following two sections, I will briefly introduce the principles

of adaptive leadership and emergence before describing how they were revealed to me over the course of the study.

Adaptive Leadership Principles

Understanding the nature of a complex adaptive system (CAS) and working through the practice of Action Research has helped me to let go of the expectations and behaviors of my old paradigm and embrace the new leadership task of facilitating change by becoming a leader that is able to move within the rhythms of a CAS. There are many terms that could be applied to this form of leadership, like resilient or transformational, or even a servant leader. I prefer the term adaptive leader primarily because it is tied to the CAS definition, but also because Heifetz and Linsky have described the process of adaptive change and adaptive leadership in terms that reflect my growing experience in the course of this study (Heifetz and Linsky 2002). In the overly simplistic vernacular that I use to speak to myself, this new way of leadership boils down to a very freeing, “Try something and see what happens.” This is also a simplistic way of looking at Action Research: ask a question, respond to the results, and measure the effect of the response and then repeat. What follows is first an explanation of the principles behind adaptive leadership and emergent change that I discovered, and then the account of my personal journey through it.

As an action researcher and adaptive leader, the first challenge I encountered was “know thyself.” This is both an ancient admonition, and a solemn one. Otto Scharmer says in *Theory U* that this admonition “appears

throughout all great wisdom traditions” (Scharmer 2009, 164). Many leaders underestimate the importance, as well as the difficulty of developing and practicing self-awareness. This discipline becomes even more important in the face of the uncertainty and unpredictability of leading a CAS. The way Paul describes Jesus in Philippians 2 captures this sense of radical self-awareness in a poetic way that has always been striking to me. “Jesus, being very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped.” Before moving into His earthly ministry, Jesus knew precisely who He was. He was God, fully and completely. Before being able to let go of that, He knew Himself. Robert Quinn refers to this as fundamental confidence, the ability to stride naked into uncertainty because of a deep peace with self (Quinn 2004). Heifetz, in the second half of *Leadership on the Line* discusses several strategies for maintaining this strong sense of self-awareness in the heat of adaptive leadership. To lead a CAS effectively over the long term, a leader needs a clear sense of why they want what they want, what ambitions and desires brought them to the position they are in, and where they long for themselves and this group of people to go. This discipline of “standing still” long enough to bring the unconscious instincts, habits and drives to the surface so they can be examined and either affirmed or rejected is an ongoing foundational habit in the life of anyone who seeks to lead a CAS, especially in a church (Quinn 2004; Heifetz and Linsky 2002; Covey 2013).

The second challenge facing an adaptive leader is to stand under their current context. Nelson and Dickens suggest that one of the roles of a transformational leader is to understand their current context (Nelson and Dickens

2015, 105). The Prayer of St. Francis says that one path to life is to seek to understand, not be understood. I would suggest that in addition to understanding, one must be willing to live within, be limited by, and become part of that context. Leonard Sweet in his book *SoulTsunami* says “There is no understanding without standing under” (Sweet 1999, 298). We see an example of submission to one’s context in Philippians 2:7 & 8 when Jesus took on the form of a servant, humbling Himself to obedience, even death on a cross. Based on His perfect knowledge of self, Jesus was free to completely and unreservedly enter into our world and be limited by it. Robert Quinn describes something like this when he talks about making a fundamental commitment to a given context, and how it brings new freedom and stimulates new energy from within that context (Quinn 2004, 116). This “standing under” will allow the adaptive leader of a CAS to more effectively discern the values that guide the system, and to explain them without being negative, critical or judgmental. They will be able to be true to the heart and values that led to the emergence of behavioral patterns in the first place. They can become a legitimate part of the system, able to see what assumptions drive it and the positive aspects of it all (Quinn 2004, 125). Brewin describes this kind of insight as “tuning in” and quotes Eckhart as saying, “We must learn to penetrate things, and find God there” (Brewin 2007, 132), which we will find in surprising ways. Stephen Covey, in describing the path to Win/Win solutions through seeking first to understand describes the resulting insights this way:

The key is to genuinely seek the welfare of the individual, to listen with empathy, to let the person get to the problem and the solution at his own pace and time... If you really seek to understand, without hypocrisy and without guile, there will be

times when you will be literally stunned with the pure knowledge and understanding that will flow to you from another human being (Covey 2013, 252).

Standing under reveals the strength that resides at the centre of the organization that has allowed it to survive and adapt in the past with a clarity that outsiders and critics will never know.

Knowing oneself enables adaptive leaders to freely and completely stand under their present context. If done properly, this should amplify the tension between leader and others in the organization, to the point of causing sparks. Staying true to oneself despite the pressure of the system to conform is guaranteed to result in conflicts. Quinn suggests that being one's authentic self within a deep commitment to being part of the organization will set off storms (Quinn 2004, 82). This is due to the fact that adaptive leaders will not need to hide from, nor minimize the significant differences between the ideals of the system and its present results, as well as the differences between their values and the values of the system (Olson and Eoyang 2001, 13). These differences will eventually bring leader and organization to a place where they are both ready to change. This state of chaotic tension is described by some as liminality (Elkington 2011). An example of this state can be found in a blacksmith's forge. The blacksmith takes iron that seems solid and unchangeable, inserts it into the fire and heats it until it is red (or sometimes white) hot. In this state, it is able to be changed without damaging the strength and integrity of the metal. If done properly, it enhances the strength and flexibility of the resulting tool or weapon. When a leader experiences this heat within the context of firm, healthy self-awareness and submission to the

current context, they are more likely to be able to resist the temptations of control and self-defense in order to inspire meaningful change.

An adaptive leader who has been properly tempered will be able to hold on to this state and experience the sense of disappointment, loneliness and grief as a kind of exile (Elkington 2011). Bill Hybels calls this “holy discontent” (Hybels 2007). They will be able to experience and observe the full range of grief that the present situation creates for everyone. Each context or structure inevitably creates winners and losers – some people will experience an advantage or privilege, while other will experience extra difficulties in accomplishing what they attempt. Often, leaders approach new contexts with a critical eye. They instinctively observe way the present configuration of the system is working against some people and begin to advocate on their behalf. This often causes conflict prematurely and alienates both the leader and the ones they advocate for from the rest of the organization. A leader who is willing to stand under will also be able to see what the present winners stand to lose if things change. They will truly sympathize and, even better, will be able to articulate the tension between the values that formed the system, and the imperfect results it is getting in such a way as to generate empathy with the losers and urgency towards deep adaptive change.

Adaptive change goes beyond tweaking structures or making slight course adjustments. Adaptive change is change on the level of attitudes and deeply entrenched habits (Heifetz and Linsky 2002). It is the kind of change that requires those who most benefit from the present system to risk the most loss. Thus Heifetz observes in *Leadership on the Line* that “[t]hose who resist most are those who

have the most to lose" (Heifetz and Linsky 2002). By being able to stand under in the heat, an adaptive leader can be truly present and aware of the grief being felt at all levels of an organization. This allows the leader to avoid simply trying to push the system in a new direction. Pushing is prideful and dangerous because as Senge observes, "The harder you push, the harder the system pushes back" (Senge 1990, 59). With the patience generated from genuinely standing under, and the security born of truly knowing oneself, an adaptive leader can begin to lead emergent adaptive change.

Emergent Change: What it is and how to lead it

When adaptive leadership practicing action research meets a complex adaptive system, emergent change is stimulated. An adaptive leader can see that the complexity and adaptivity of a human system precludes control and predictability. They have discarded the more mechanistic approaches of creating a vision in a solo activity, rolling out a plan and convincing people to follow the plan to its conclusion. Instead, they begin by acting from their own self-awareness to become aware of the simple rules (described below) that guide the activities of the organization. They stand under in the heat of the conflict between their values, the organization's values and the actual behaviour of all of the agents in the system. They seek to understand how the emergent nature of the CAS can interact with their leadership in order to self-organize in beneficial ways.

Emergence, self-organization and simple rules are foundational concepts that need to be understood in order to intentionally facilitate adaptive change in a CAS. Zimmerman gives simple definitions of each of these terms:

Emergence is the appearance of outcomes in the form of new outcomes in the form of new structures, patterns or processes that are *unpredictable* from the components that created them...*Self-organization* is order that is created internally rather than by an external force...*Minimum specifications* are also known as *simple rules*. They are the few guiding conditions that determine the design of the system. This is used both inductively to understand what rules of interaction are shaping the current system and used deductively to identify new rules of interaction which could create a healthy system... (Zimmerman 2011)

An emergent system, then, shows nonlinear qualities when the agency of each part of the system combined with the interactions each part has with a stimulus and each other are so complex that the end cannot be predicted (Marion and Bacon 2000). Self-organization is how adaptivity manifests itself in living systems, as in the example of slime molds, earlier. Despite all of this talk of unpredictability however, there is hope of gaining at least some idea of what the possible outcomes might be, through the discernment of simple rules. Although it is impossible to predict the behavior of a given agent within an adaptive system, it is possible to discern some very basic principles (simple rules) that govern the interactions of each with the whole. The most famous example of this comes from Craig Reynold's observation of a flock of birds that wheeled through the air in very complex adaptive patterns that were not chaotic, and never seemed to result in disaster for the birds. Through creating a computer simulation of "boids," scientists were able to simulate the behavior of a flock through three simple rules: maintain a constant relative speed, avoid collision with other birds, and move

towards the perceived center of the flock. It is suggested that each CAS is governed by a small set of simple rules as they self-organize (Westley, Zimmerman, and Patton 2007, 39–41). These simple rules provide a way to reduce the complexity and unpredictability of a system into a form that a leader can interact with in order to bring purposeful change.

Leading emergent change will result in something that is almost the complete opposite of what mechanistic leadership seeks. Adaptive leaders tend to feel like they lose control, rather than gain it. Mechanistic leadership seeks to chart a course and pursue it, regardless of the condition of the seas. Adaptive leaders attempt to ride the waves of emergent change and release unpredictable newness from seemingly random places by recognizing that each system has the ability to shape itself according to its own internal logic. In some ways, leading emergent change could require less effort, since the adaptivity of a CAS means that a tiny change in the right place and time could lead to exponential results (Wheatley 2006, 120, 121). With an understanding of these crucial factors in a CAS, adaptive leaders can stimulate emergent change in four significant ways: sifting complaints, seeing bright spots, dropping seeds of emergence and generating the right kinds of attractors.

First, an adaptive leader will have the ability to sift complaints to gain their maximum value. Complaints, as Peter Dickens says, are only “poorly worded requests” (comments during a lecture, June 2015). An adaptive leader will be able to ask themselves the question, “What are they really asking for?” and discern the “song beneath the words” or heart behind the complaint (Heifetz and

Linsky 2002, 64). Fully developed, this attitude enables a leader to lean forward with genuine, eager curiosity and say, “Tell me more about that. What’s the story here?” These complaints will come from both the centre and the edges and provide a valuable source of information to the leader who is ready for them. As I mentioned in chapter 4, the methodology of action research fits very well with this way of thinking and leading. It allows a leader to ask questions without feeling obligated to have a pre-determined vision regarding the right way to go.

Secondly, an adaptive leader will be able to see the bright spots (Heath and Heath 2010, 28) more clearly. These sparks of light can sometimes be allies from within the centre whose values converge with the leader’s; sometimes they are positive outliers who get the result the system desires but break all the rules while doing it and other times they will be people on the edge of the system doing something new and creative who need to be noticed and empowered. This last group of people are served by the leader “tending to the edges” as they stand under the strength from the centre (lecture comments from Morar Murray-Hayes, June 2015).

Third, an adaptive leader can drop seeds of emergence (Marion and Uhl-Bien 2001, 405) through encouraging novelty (Plowman 2007). As the heat rises and the sparks start to fly, it then becomes the task of the adaptive leader to resist the urge to “lead,” in the traditional sense. An adaptive leader can do this by creating organizational “containers” where the people from the edges and the people from the centre can come together and have “transforming exchanges” (Olson and Eoyang 2001) which are conversations that bring constructive change

to all parties. McCandless and Lipmanowicz, in their book and on their website describe an exercise to do just this, called “Wicked Questions” (McCandless and Lipmanowicz 2014) which identifies two apparently contradictory dynamics and challenges participants to find a way to resolve them. An adaptive leader will be able to facilitate multiple and ongoing conversations like these that help people get to know one another and wrestle with the wicked questions and seek win/win solutions. This is, of course, easier said than done, and takes a great deal of time and effort to keep the conversation going along healthy respectful, solution-based lines. But it is the key to allowing truly creative self-organization to emerge.

Finally, as those seeds take root, sprout and grow, another concept that will help a leader release the emergent, self-organizing properties of the church CAS is the idea of attractors. Nelson and Dickens suggest that releasing these properties is a similar challenge to getting a bird to fly into a bucket. Their solution is not in forcing the bird to do what we want, but rather in finding out what the bird wants so that one can entice it into the bucket (Nelson and Dickens 2015). An adaptive leader standing under their context will get to know the simple rules well enough to understand the kinds of attractors that will draw people out of their current attitudes and behaviours and lead them towards the adaptive changes that are desired. Through reflecting deeply on the existing simple rules, any person within the system could attempt to generate and insert a new simple rule that could permeate the system and thus bring about change all by itself. It is true that this ability could be used manipulatively, but hopefully the process of truly seeking to understand will mean that the end the leader is pursuing is a

mutually beneficial one. CAS's are also usually resilient and have the capacity to resist or reject non-beneficial changes, all by themselves, if a leader becomes self-serving and manipulative.

Therefore, the traits that will support an adaptive leader as they seek to lead a CAS are: self-awareness, standing under the present context, an ability to withstand the heat of liminality, sifting through the complaints and bright spots, dropping seeds of emergence, and generating the right kinds of attractors. The next sections will show how I was naturally invited to act out these principles in the course of the research project.

Application of Adaptive Leadership Principles to Leading Emergent Change

This project was the context within which I was exposed to a new way of looking at leadership and also provided the context for me to initially test and practice the effectiveness of these same principles.

Knowing Myself

Engaging in this study required ethical reflection on my part. First of all, I was forced to think through my motivations for studying our welcome of strangers. This led me to the insight that my father's "outsider" relationship with the church was a key source of my own passion for welcoming strangers. This happened when I was telling the story of my father's passing at one of our Doctor of Ministry residencies. As I talked about his rejection of the church of his childhood, and the joy of his growing interest in my ministry near the end of his

life, it hit me that my love for my father, my desire to see him come to faith, and my longing to have him participate in the life of a local church was at the core of my evangelistic passion. As I work with people outside of the church, and as new people come into the church, I see my father's face in their eyes and feel a similar passion and longing for their own spiritual journey to join ours. This revelation took away a lot of the judgmental angst that I laid upon our church family. I stopped being so accusatory as I tried to stir up evangelistic passion for hospitality. I was able to affirm the strength of the passion within me without judging others for not having it. This was a key "standing still" moment of coming to a deeper understanding of the role that my unique voice could play in our congregation's future.

Secondly, reflecting on potential conflicts of interest as an insider researcher led me to see that while I felt pushed towards being a driver of change, I enjoy facilitating the process of asking good questions much more. Listening, rather than fixing, is a far healthier stance for me to take when approaching my leadership responsibilities.

Simple Rules of WFMC

Taking this stance released me to seek to understand Weyburn Free Methodist Church through this new leadership lens. I often feel that my job as Lead Pastor is an awful lot like herding cats (Bennis 1997). There are too many to keep track of (complex), they always seem to go whichever way they want, no matter what I do (adaptive), and yet they seem to like being together (system).

The idea of discerning the simple rules that lie under a CAS's self-organization has been of great value in focusing my thoughts and efforts in a productive direction. As I prepared to enter into the action research project studying our church's welcome, I asked our pastoral staff team to help me look for a couple of simple rules, or minimum specs, that seem to govern the behavioral and decision-making culture of WFMC. These rules informed and were enhanced by the project.

The identity of WFMC seems to be primarily shaped by two interacting ideals: we are both a People of Commitment and a Place of Acceptance. The manifestation of the first aspect of our identity, that we are a People of Commitment, is expressed best by the simple rule that Action is Proof of Ownership. Action, and the contributions that arise from it, is seen as the fundamental sign of commitment and ownership to the people of WFMC. Thus the contributions of time, treasure and talent of God's people must be honoured. Proving one's commitment through dependable attendance at services and events, helping out in ministries that express need, and joining existing teams seems to be the key required for WFMC people to trust a new person with responsibility and relationship. It seems to be incumbent on newcomers to make the first move, either relationally or ministry-wise. When a person takes action and makes a proactive contribution to the church, it is a signal to the enduring, committed core that a new member of WFMC has emerged. At first, I thought that this rule was contrary to the principles of hospitality which seemed to require an unconditional openness to strangers. The data which emerged from the interviews showed that

most newcomers who encounter our church assume that this rule is both reasonable and expected. Our newcomers came in assuming that they needed to take some sort of initiative in order to get involved and be accepted.

The second aspect of our identity that we have observed is shown by the slogan “A Place of Acceptance,” as expressed by the simple rule People Can Come as They Are. In the 1990’s, as part of the changeover to contemporary worship, there was a deliberate break from a more traditional approach to Sunday services and embrace of a more contemporary service style in order to more effectively welcome newcomers to the church. This has been whole-heartedly adopted by the congregation. This means that people who come to the church and give evidence of different lifestyle choices that in some churches would cause consternation, fear or even outright rejection, don’t even make a ripple in our people. Differences are not feared or judged in our congregation. Once again, the interview data showed that this is not just an ideal, but rather is an actively practiced discipline in our congregation. The intentional welcome of greeters at the door, the atmosphere of our worship services, the content of our preaching, and the way we communicate opportunities for involvement all conveyed a sense of welcome and acceptance that reveal an underlying attitude of hospitality. These two rules - Action is proof of ownership, and People can come as they are – are the most obvious guiding principles that our pastoral staff was able to discern at this time.

Standing Under the WFCM Simple Rules

For many years, I resisted making the fundamental commitment to stand under WFCM's simple rule of commitment out of fear of surrendering the value of acceptance. I was also afraid of over-committing and losing myself in the process. This lack manifested itself through thoughts like, "Maybe I'm not the leader for this place," and "I'm here until they tell me they don't want me." I found myself looking for other job opportunities on a regular basis. This has changed over the course of the study. The required self-reflection helped me to become more aware of and settled within myself. Thus I have been free to let go and trust that the important uniqueness of who I am can never be taken away from me. I believe I have been able to make this fundamental commitment to stand under the simple rules of WFCM sometime during this project. One example of a change I observed in myself occurred when we were reflecting on the challenge for newcomers to make new friends in our foyer after the service. One of our research team members confessed that it was hard for him to take that initial step to connect with people he didn't know. As he shared his sincere desire to help people connect, and the social awkwardness that he too felt, I realized that I had been too hard on our church people. The bridge needed to be built from both sides. I realized that newcomers and WFCM regulars both needed help in practicing hospitality. This kind of epiphany happened regularly throughout the study and has led to two surprising side effects in my life. First, I see the simple rules and the committed core people of the church differently now. Understanding that the present system emerged by itself for good reasons has helped me

appreciate that while there may be energy on the edges, there is also strength in the centre. Submitting to the present context has enabled me to honour past leaders and see wisdom in why the church operates as it does. I am no longer solely focused on the limitations, but can see the positives as well. Ironically, it has taken me this long to find the face of God within the Church, while I have been constantly looking for Him amongst the lost sheep. This has led to a surprising second side effect: warmth. My wife has been quicker to pick up on this than I have. Since I have made this fundamental commitment, she has remarked weekly on how warmly people are behaving towards her. If commitment is the key to relationship and responsibility, then somehow WPMC people have intuited that our commitment level is different and are responding accordingly.

This is my current growing edge as an adaptive leader within the CAS of WPMC. While I feel that I have come through my own sense of exile and into a state of fundamental commitment to the church, I still struggle with advocating for people who are being kept at arm's length by people at the centre. The losers in our present system are those who are not able to demonstrate commitment to the satisfaction of the power brokers at the core. My in-the-moment response to complaints continues to be less curious and more defensive than I would like. However, as my newly chosen fundamental commitment works its way into my heart, I am beginning to understand and empathize with the potential losses of the people at the centre, as well as allowing myself to be led by their hard-won wisdom.

In reflecting with the research team about how this project has affected us, one member observed that they had become more sympathetic regarding the plight of the newcomer and felt more keenly the responsibility of the church family to practice hospitality by intentionally reaching out to everyone with friendliness and compassion. At the same time, I have observed myself becoming more sympathetic concerning the plight of the regular attender at WFMC, recognizing that it is tiring, awkward, and sometimes discouraging to keep trying to be friendly to a steady flow of new faces and wonder if what you do actually makes a difference. By being willing to stand under the values of our congregation, we have both moved towards the centre as we have grown in empathy and understanding. The heart of hospitality towards “the other” has grown in all of us. The team identified a key theme of mutual responsibility on the part of both the newcomer and the core member of WFMC in order to connect – “it takes two to tango.”

Sifting Complaints, Identifying Bright Spots

One of the gifts of not facilitating the interviews myself has been the freedom I have gained to listen for complaints and bright spots in a safe, objective environment. Removing the Lead Pastor/Researcher from the immediate context allowed for everything to be put on the table and then sifted through group discernment, as opposed to a grievance being brought to the leader (me), who then is sorely tempted to respond defensively. For example, when one of the couples shared that the content of the preaching was significant reason why they

had chosen a different church. Had I been present in the room, this may not have come out. Had I been one of the interviewers, I know that I would have had a hard time asking the follow up question that allowed the interviewer to dig deeper into what it was about the preaching that specifically didn't appeal to them. They then shared that they felt that the target audience of the preaching in our church seemed to be newer believers, which they were not. This piece of feedback, while initially coming across as negative, is actually one of the values we strive for in our services, since we want to be a place of acceptance that helps people feel welcome, where our preaching is relevant to the issues of daily life. Keeping the preaching pastor out of the interviews helped these sorts of helpful pieces of information to emerge more freely.

While an increased capacity to safely elicit complaints was a significant benefit to this method of information gathering, it also allowed for a more accurate balance of positive and negative to emerge. I recognize that I tend to be a critical thinker, who is always looking for something to fix. Had I been in the room, I expect that would have been the bias of my questioning. What emerged naturally from the interviews was a very different picture. The interviews showed that the overwhelming majority of the feedback newcomers had to offer was positive. There are far more bright spots than complaints in the WFMC context. While the interviews were skewed towards positivity by the gift of listening, this positivity nonetheless provided the research team and me with energy to feed bright spots while also responding to specific pieces of critical feedback.

The research team observed a major shift in my attitude as a leader and

pastor throughout this project, as did I. I have found myself far more positive about the church after transcribing the interviews. Listening to the positivity of our newcomers towards our church helped me see things in a much more positive light. Beyond that, the sheer shift in responsibility from being the visionary to being the “chief listener” has taken a huge weight off my shoulders and changed my perceived role. I am no longer responsible for fixing the church. Rather I am responsible to listen well and involve others in the listening process so that together we can listen to God and let Him lead us in a path of response. This has resulted in a significant increase in confidence and peacefulness that the research team observed over this past two-year period.

The use of group discernment also served to set me free from the burden of being the visionary leader. As we sifted through the results of the first round of interviews, I was so captured by the way the interviews affected our research team, that all I wanted to do was simply have more interviews. As the team processed the very same data, their conclusion was that the newcomers needed a Welcome: Connect team. This was a wonderful outcome that I would have completely missed, had I been limited to my own visionary capabilities.

Dropping Seeds of Emergence

This action research project has also been a clear example of what happens when a group of people ask good questions and take appropriate action in response. Much like the ripple that spreads when a pebble is dropped into a pond. The influence of the research team as they led the formation of the Welcome:

Connect team has been evident, if not always quantifiable due to the complex nature of church relationships. As the interviews generated new thoughts and feelings in both vacillators and participants, seeds of emergence were likely already dropping. Facilitators would seek out interview participants in church and on the street, having genuinely warm conversations. These conversations were witnessed by others and had an influence. The launch of the Welcome: Connect team generated conversation, interest, and motivated some to volunteer to join the team. As even more connections were made, the relational warmth people felt before, during and after the services increased. Others got ideas for their own ministries and so the small group potlucks and women's social events were generated, in what we have come to call a halo effect. There may not be an identifiable cause and effect relationship, but connections seem to be clear as the system spontaneously shifted in response to new stimuli, thus generating a virtuous pattern of emergence.

Releasing Emergent Change Through the Empowering of Attractors

A key result of this new understanding of leadership is that it is people who attract people. Intentionally investing deeply in the hearts and lives of a few significant people has had a major influence on the entire church. A key lesson I have learned through this entire process is that if I want to see big change that affects a lot of people happen quickly, then I as a leader need to go deep and slow, with a few. Then I get to stand back and watch the ripples expand with a speed and an impact that is staggering and has only just begun.

Summary

In my previous leadership paradigm, I felt that people expected the leader to be the one who steps in, provides blinding insight, makes a big a speech and convinces people that his solution is the one to act on. The leader then had the full responsibility for maintaining enthusiasm and working the plan until the people had reached the Promised Land. I have never yet in my twenty years of pastoral leadership been able to do this. Therefore, I am discarding that methodology for one that I think will work much better in a CAS. The practice of action research which leads to listening to the context and then responding is, I believe, a far superior posture for leading a CAS than my version of traditional “visionary leadership.” I believe that one of the most difficult tasks for me as an adaptive leader is to avoid the temptation to be the hero. Instead, as I lead forward and listen carefully to our context, and share the responsibility to respond to what I/we heard, we will be able to embed deep levels of adaptive change into this complex adaptive system. That will release the emergent properties of that system to work out a beneficial future all by itself.

Therefore, I invite pastoral leaders, and others who sit in places of responsibility over complex adaptive systems to courageously invest the time to develop self-awareness, understand the simple rules of their context and stand under them, sift through complaints and look for bright spots in the heat of liminality, drop and nurture seeds of emergence by intentionally investing in the development of small groups of attractive hospitable people. Listen and respond. Go small, slow and deep and watch God’s Kingdom grow, all by itself.

Conclusion

This project generated an informed response to the experiences of newcomers to Weyburn Free Methodist Church (WFMC) through interviews that solicited first-hand accounts of newcomers' experiences with WFMC. Group discernment meetings revealed clear patterns in why people come to our church, get involved, choose their level of involvement with the WFMC church family. An intentional response to these patterns revealed that an intentional effort to improve hospitality results in an increase of newcomers getting involved in activities and relationships beyond Sunday morning. We observed a ripple effect from the actions of a small but motivated group of people, and learned the value of attentive listening in generating positive relational connections. The team-based activity of leading an action research project also resulted in a transformational paradigm shift in how I approach the task of leading change in a church.

APPENDIX 1:
SEMI-STRUCTURED
INTERVIEW 1 SCHEDULE

Location: interviewee's home (preferred), or the place of their choosing – public space, church or interviewer's home.

Introduction

1. Welcome, and thank you for your time.
2. Small talk about the weather, their day, etc.

Consent

3. Restate the reason for the project and the interview, including the amount of time you expect the interview to take, and their freedom to leave at any time. Restate the process for expressing any complaints they may have about their experience with the project.
4. Confirm the understanding and signing of informed consent form.

Demographic information

5. Can I confirm your name, please?
6. Would you mind telling me which decade of age you fall into? 20-30, 30-40 etc.
7. Record gender
8. What is your place of birth?
9. Where were you raised?
10. How long have you lived in Weyburn?
11. Where did you move to Weyburn from?

Religious Background

12. What is your religious background/upbringing?
 - a. Were you part of a church family growing up? What was your level of participation as a family?
 - b. How did your parents feel about organized religion?
 - c. Were there significant shifts in how your family felt about church?
 - d. Did you ever experience a change of opinion regarding church as you were maturing?

13. How would you describe your attitude towards Christianity before you encountered WFMC?

Exposure to WFMC

14. When did you first hear about WFMC?
15. How did you learn about the church? (friend, media, etc.)
16. What was your initial impression of the church based on what you heard?
17. When did you begin to consider becoming involved at WFMC?
18. How did that come about?
19. What was it that opened your mind to becoming involved?

Initial Encounters

20. What was the first option for involvement that was available to you?
21. When you first encountered a WFMC ministry program, what was your first impression?
22. What were the key factors influencing your initial impression?

Opportunities/Obstacles to further involvement

23. Were you ever presented an opportunity to become involved in a small group or ministry team? If so, how?
24. Did you get involved in either of those activities (ministry or small group)? If so, please describe your experience with them.

Present Condition

25. How has your past involvement with WFMC influenced your views towards Christianity?
26. How has your past involvement with WFMC influenced your behaviour?
27. How would you describe your present involvement with WFMC?
28. What factors have been most influential in determining your present involvement?
29. If you were to get more involved, what would need to change for you?
30. How would you describe your present feelings towards WFMC?
31. If those feelings were to improve what would need to change for you?

Feedback

32. If you could say something to anyone at WFMC, who would it be and what would you say? (pastors, leaders, people, specific persons?)

Follow-up & closure

33. Would you be interested in receiving information/invitations about new programs/initiatives that may be designed to respond to the concerns or encouragement received from these interviews? Please note that if we engage in a general advertising or marketing campaign we would be unable to filter you out, but we will not aim anything specifically at you if you wish to not hear from us.

34. Would you like to be informed when a draft of the study is ready to be shared? Would you like to know when this is going to be shared with the WFMC congregation? Would you like a copy of the thesis when it is finished?

Thanks so much for your time and honest feedback. Should you have any questions or concerns about this interview, please contact either Pastor Jay or Tyndale seminary. Contact information will be on your consent form.

APPENDIX 2:
SEMI-STRUCTURED
INTERVIEW 2 SCHEDULE

Location: interviewee's home (preferred), or the place of their choosing – public space, church or interviewer's home.

Introduction

1. Welcome, and thank you for your time.
2. Small talk about the weather, their day, etc.

Consent

3. Review the original reason for the project and the purpose for the follow up interview, including the amount of time you expect the interview to take, and their freedom to leave at any time. Restate the process for expressing any complaints they may have about their experience with the project.
4. Review and reconfirm the understanding and signing of informed consent form.

Review of previous interview

5. It has been a year since we last talked. First, I want to reflect on the effect of the interview on you.
6. What effect, if any, did the interview have on how you thought about your relationship with WFMC?
 - a. Did it affect how you saw your part in the relationship?
 - b. The church's part?
 - c. God's part?

Change in the Church

7. Have you observed any changes in WFMC over the past year?
 - a. How do you feel about what you have observed?
8. How has your relationship with the church changed?
 - a. How do you feel about that?
9. How has your participation in church programs changed?
 - a. How do you feel about that?
10. How have your relationships with WFMC people changed?
 - a. How do you feel about that?

11. How has your relationship with WFCM pastors changed?
 - a. How do you feel about that?
12. What would you like to see happen in the next year?

Change in personal spirituality

13. How has your relationship with God changed in the past year?
 - a. How do you feel about that?
 - b. How do you think God feels about that?
14. What would you like to see happen in your relationship with God in the next year?

Feedback

15. If you could say something to anyone at WFCM who would it be and what would you say? (pastors, leaders, people, specific persons?)
16. How do you think taking part in the study has affected your life?

Follow-up & closure

17. You have already told us about your interest in further information about the study. Are you still interested in hearing about the results?

Thanks so much for your time and honest feedback. Should you have any questions or concerns about this interview, please contact either Pastor Jay or Tyndale seminary. Contact information will be on your consent form.

APPENDIX 3:
DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION
MEETING AGENDAS

Thesis Research Team – Discerning Themes

November 2, 2015

1. Re-engage: Preparing the ground in prayer
 - a. John 10 – “My sheep know my voice”
 - b. Other voices – the voice of judgement, cynicism, and fear.
 - c. Prayer to surrender our current condition & ideas, opening to the voice of the Good Shepherd, and silencing the other voices.
2. Relate: What has been your favourite part/moments about doing the interviews? What touched you? Tell some stories – don’t worry about being scientific.
3. What are we looking for? Themes and ONE possible response/idea to build on or correct the behaviors of newcomers
4. Debriefing in more detail (possibly next meeting? With transcripts read and highlighted?) Share quotes that relate to these questions:
 - a. What information did you gain that made you happy?
 - b. What confused you?
 - c. What upset you and made you want to fix something?
 - d. What resonated with/confirmed your image of WFMC?
 - e. What contradicted your own experience/perception of WFMC?
5. Reflect: Themes (begin with reflecting prayer)
 - a. What overall themes emerged from your interviews?
 - b. Circle chart – identify themes around the outside and then zero in on common ground
 - c. Ask about root causes/principles/attitudes that generate this field/pattern
 - d. Listening Prayer time
 - i. Limiting factors?
 - ii. Who is not speaking/ignored/voiceless in this conversation?
 - iii. What are the Spirit’s priorities for us as a Church as we consider this field?
6. Respond: Any initial thoughts of how to respond?
7. Discussion of “min specs” – basic principles of how WFMC operates

- a. Are these on target with your experience?
- b. How would you rewrite them or add to them?
- c. How does the evidence you gathered in the interviews alter your perception of these min specs?
- d. Reflecting prayer

Welcome: Connect Team Meeting

March 17, 2016

Re-engage – Prayer

Taking Notes/Recording

Reviewing the story of how we got here:

1. What was our original research question?
2. What method did we choose to gather info about that question?
3. What came out of that?
4. What's our goal as Welcome: Connect? (If there's time, it would be fun to ask: what would do the opposite?)

Relating Our Experiences

5. What experiences have we had so far? (Stories) What do we want to celebrate? What have we learned from them? What do we want to do differently/improve on?

Reflecting

6. What data will help us know how we're doing?
7. How do we collect that?

Responding

8. What action steps do we want to take?
 - a. Scheduling sign up sheet at booth?
 - b. Training new people?
9. How will we involve Jody (and/or Alex and/or anyone else who wants to volunteer - in leadership?)
10. When will we meet to measure again?
What will we do for Easter?

Welcome: Connect Agenda: May 19, 2016

1. Re-engage – Prayer of Hospitality
2. Review – definition of “hospitality”, goals of the study
3. Relate – stories, experiences, interviews
4. Reflect – What is going well? What needs to be changed? What new ideas are you coming up with?
5. Respond – How do we prepare for the summer?

Welcome Connect Agenda Sept 22, 2016

1. Summer Story time – highlights and struggles
2. Re-Engage - “Entering In” Prayer
3. Relating & Reflecting: Connections:
 - a. Who has moved from newcomer to a small group or ministry?
How did it happen? What was our role?
 - b. Are we accomplishing what we hoped?
 - c. Change vs acceptance
4. Respond: Handing over leadership:
 - a. Passing on to Jody
 - b. Point person
5. Scheduling options:
 - a. Schedule yourself
 - b. Jumping in
 - c. Rotations
 - d. Recruiting new people

Blessing and dismissal of non-research people

6. Interviews:
 - a. Summer struggles
 - b. Cold calls
 - c. Possible solutions
 - d. Ongoing interviewing
 - e. End date goal: Oct 31

Thesis Team Developmental Evaluation Meeting

February 23, 2017

1. Welcome – Intent – 2 meetings of 90 minutes each?
2. Re-engage: Prayer
3. Review: Context
 - a. Look – Think – Act cycles of action research
 - b. Attendance plateau -> connecting -> the wall -> how to improve our welcome? -> interviews -> foyer as key -> welcome connect team -> mid-term evaluation: small group potlucks connection? -> second round of interviews -> evaluation
 - c. Research question: how to improve our welcome?
4. Initial interviews – by name (profiles handed out)
 - a. Anything new jump out?
 - b. My thoughts
5. Relate: W:C experience debrief
 - a. Effect on you
 - b. Effect on church
 - c. Effect on newcomers
6. Second round interview review (profiles handed out)
 - a. Trends
 - b. Comparison/contrast
7. Reflect: Thesis team experience – ups and downs
 - a. What was the effect on you?
 - b. What was the effect on me?
8. SILENCE
9. Big Picture themes
10. Respond: The search for MEANING
 - a. What can WFMC learn? What do we want people to know?
 - b. Where does WFMC go from here?
 - c. Does anything apply to other churches?

APPENDIX 4:

INTERVIEW SUMMARY CHART

First round interviews – Chart 1

Participant #	1	2	3 & 4	5 & 6	7
Background	Nominal Catholic	Personal faith	Devout, very involved	Strong Christians	Committed traditional Lutheran
How came to WFMC	Met lead pastor	Friends invited	Drove by, saw the sign	Referred by a friend	Friend recommended
Predisposition	Curious	Looking for a home church (LfHC)	LfHC	LfHC	Interested
First impression	Welcoming, relaxed, non-judgmental, comfortable	Similar to home church, welcoming	Welcoming, singing, simple, low-key,	Good music, a lot like previous church	Friendly, non-judgmental
Involvement – how	Heard about things	Pastoral promotion of small groups	Joined a bible study (bulletin?), men's night; she was invited lots, said no many times	Invited to teach Sunday school, missions, small group	Lots of opportunity, no interest
Highlights	Likes youth ministry, missions	Greeters, children's ministry	relational	Friendly people, upbeat and contemporary	Excellent, lots of young people
What changes to make	Personal – more time, husband's interest	Personal – more commitment, longer worship	Make the day longer! Feeling called to a smaller community	Husband's job schedule	Make the church closer & easier to get to

Participant #	1	2	3 & 4	5 & 6	7
			near to Weyburn		
How it's changed them	Services energized	Feeding growth	Emotional health, open-mindedness ,	More actively involved in church life, deepened prayer life	n/a
Current state	Non-attending	Semi-regular attender	Super involved	Small group, ministry	Attending elsewhere

First Round Interviews – Chart 2

Participant #	8	9	10	11 & 12	13 & 14
Background	Spiritual	Devout evangelical	Believer but church not a priority	Devout Christians	Devout involved Pentecostal
How came to WFMC	Lead pastor did family funeral	online	Met lead pastor through exorcism	online	Yellow pages, drove by
Predisposition	seeking	LfHC	Good memories, interest	LfHC	LfHC
First impression	awesome	Church on fire - music	Greeter, pastor made things comfortable	Friendly, good worship, not a real sermon (testimony), young people	Quiet and old
Involvement – how	Decorating – bulletin Small group – counselling with pastor	Pastor invited	Tried, but busy with job and kids	Small group promoted – joined	Men’s night – bulletin Children’s ministry – volunteered, led to Small group
Highlights		Children’s ministry, baby shower,	greeters	Relationships with small group	Small group for her
What changes to make	Personal – manage time better Wants to become a member	Personal – waiting for son to graduate high school Church – ethnic ministry opportunity	Wants a real BIBLE study, needs friends within the church – foyer is hard	More substance from pulpit, more interaction between generations	Change membership process, be more open to change in general
How it’s changed them	Closer to God when attending services	Sermons help her grow, caring church	n/a	n/a	More open to other traditions
Current state	Lapsed attendance	Regular attender	Occasional attender	Attending elsewhere	Moved, occasional attends

Second round interviews

Participant #	2-1	2-2 & 2-3	2-4 & 2-5	2 - 6
Background	Wandering believer	Church background, non-attending	Church background – catholic and evangelical	Devout Lutheran
How came to WFMC	Friend and client recommend	Dad’s dying wish, wandered in to Xmas eve	Friends, knew pastor	Daughter – personal crisis
Predisposition	LfHC	LfHC	LfHC	LfHC
First impression	Blown away – music, sermons, children’s ministry all powerful	Sermons, personable people, welcoming	Prayer and community service, felt a “presence” – touched their hearts	Teens like it! Music, interactive sermons, outreach-oriented
Involvement – how	Personal invitation to event, then group. Alpha. Volunteered for coffee ministry	Just attending – know there’s other opportunities out there	VBS for kids	Ladies night – bulletin Alpha - bulletin
Highlights	Services, relationships	Likes opportunities to give	VBS, music, preaching	Community concern, missions, baby shower was huge
What changes to make	Personal – more time Question – what’s a Free Methodist?	Personal – waiting for kids to leave home, interested in helping with business/finance gifts	Personal – wants to get spouse to commit and leave catholic Music can be used more intentionally to open people	Questions re: baptism/dedication, what’s a Free Methodist?
How it’s changed them	Quit smoking, greater knowledge	Opportunities to grow, preaching informs emotional health	n/a	Good support, inspiration
Current state	Connected, involved	Semi-regular attenders	Semi-regular attenders	Regular attender

Second round re-interviews

Participant #	3 & 4	9	10
Interview effect	Pay more attention to newcomers - Made it important to remember how it feels Reflect on journey	Made me feel like part of the family, inspired to get more involved, developed friendship with interviewers	Made me think about getting the kids to church more to give them what I got Was a good nudge Getting to know interviewers was a gift
Changes in church	Welcome connect Lead Pastor is more available	People seem more interested in talking beyond hi, how are you?	Always a good experience – more of the same Notices new young families, wants to meet them, but feels shy in the big group
Personal changes	Joined small group – very positive Connected with interviewers Surrendered financial control to God Surrendered 100% of schedule to God Doing ministry together	Talked to pastor about doing dishes or cleaning the church Connected to pastor Wants to be more content and purposeful in spirituality	Wants to grow Burden of guilt for not being involved
Recommendations	Make it easier to join a group		Wants more opportunities to study the bible

APPENDIX 5: THE ORIGIN OF THE WELCOME: CONNECT TEAM

The following are the notes I produced to show the results of our group discernment analysis meeting where we evaluated Data Set 1 – the transcripts from the first round of interviews. This is what led to the creation of the Welcome: Connect Team:

Everyone had a church background of some kind. Most had clear ideas of what they were looking for when they came, whether it was children’s ministry, worship style, type of preaching, or friendly people. These were the most common aspects of church that people were looking for, and most had positive things to say about what they found, both in the worship service itself, the programs supporting it and the people they met. One woman simply said of her first impression, “it was awesome!” The following themes emerged in order of frequency:

Friendliness:

“One of the things I like about it... is all the newcomers in the community are obviously very welcome...”

“I thought at once we just liked it...It was very welcoming, the person at the door greeting us...it felt very welcoming...”

“Very friendly. Very friendly. This guy opens the door for you...it’s a

friendly presentation...people trying to get to know my name...”

“Coming into church that first day? There was an amazing older gentleman, he stands at the door and he welcomes you every day you come to church. I love him! He’s amazing...And as soon as you walk past him then we had another two people say hello hi how are you. That sold me. Right there I was sold.”

Music:

“I remember connecting well with the music at the church...”

“The worship was good.”

“The worship was well done.”

“Because it was a church on fire, the worship service. It’s not very hard to enter...”

Preaching

“...Pastor Jay, he’s a great dynamic speaker. I really enjoy his speaking.”

“It was like the church we attended...the atmosphere and music and the kind of preaching is very much the same.”

Interesting to the team was that the people who came looking for a home church were willing to overlook certain deficiencies because of other strengths in the church. Very few people encountered “deal breakers,” especially right away. Once again, we were left with a sense of a generally healthy church that generates a positive first impression with newcomers. But how to inspire something more? If we were doing most things well, what was missing?

Two words captured the overall feel of the interviews for our team:

compelling and connecting. The team was disappointed at how easily some could be discouraged from coming and being part of our church. They felt that some people lacked a compelling reason for coming and joining us. We heard things such as:

“There were lots of opportunities available, it was more just me not having the time.”

...” a lot of the things I was interested in attending, I just found that I didn’t have the time.”

“...there was always opportunity. They would mention that to everybody; all are welcome...but that’s not my goal...now I just sit back and enjoy...”

“The church is there and it is available for me, I just have to make myself more of a commitment.”

“I do get frustrated at myself, and part of it is due to a mismanagement of time...”

These sentiments raised the question, “How can we provide people with a compelling reason to be part of our church?” Love was a word that we discussed as something that could compel people to come, and the question of how to do this best led us into a time of prayerful, silent reflection.

After reflecting as a team, there was a strong sense of empathy and concern for newcomers. Passion and love for people that previously were not on the relational radar of our team was really quite intense in the room. We wanted to

do something to serve them better. The overall conclusion of the group was that the most significant factor in the ongoing experience of newcomers was the sense of “lostness” in the foyer, especially following the service. We had previously talked about how when people want to get involved, they will make the effort, and there was evidence to back that up in the interviews. However, there was a moment when we read one person’s account as follows:

“I’m friendly, and I’m outgoing when I know people in my comfortable surroundings but when I get into...like the church is very friendly and everything...but it’s still a lot of people I don’t know...I’m not outgoing enough to stop and say, ‘Hey what are you doing? Do you want to go for coffee?’”

To which one member of our team replied, “I feel the same way – I want to reach out to new people in the foyer, but I don’t know how. I don’t feel I have the right.” There was what I would call a *moment of clarity* where the entire group saw that while our welcome was strong and warm, people needed help to connect. There was a need for mutual responsibility on the part of newcomers and regular attenders alike to reach out to one another, and *our foyer was not a conducive space for doing this and that we all could use some help there*. This led the group to act on this by creating a new version of our greeter’s ministry called the “Welcome: Connect” team, with the goal of not only welcoming everyone to the church in a warm friendly manner, but also being on the lookout for people who want to get connected to the people of the church on a deeper level.

APPENDIX 6: INFORMED CONSENT FORM



Weyburn Free Methodist Church

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Created as a requirement of the Tyndale DMIN program

Current Revision completed: July 7, 2015

Introduction

Thank you for your willingness to participate in our study! We really hope that your participation in this study will help WFMC become a better church, and that your experience with our church family continues to get better and better. Your thoughts and opinions are very important to us, and we want you to know exactly what we intend to do. So please read the following form very carefully.

Interview: We would like to explore the story of your journey in connection with Weyburn Free Methodist Church. In this 60-90 minute interview, you will be asked for your candid reflections on many aspects of our church. Please be as honest and open as you are able. We will keep all of your comments confidential. What this means is that any reporting of this study will strip identifying information from your comments so that you cannot be identified from what you said. No one other than the research team will know what you shared with us.

To aid in our data analysis, we request your permission to take notes during the interview, to make an audio recording, and to transcribe it for analysis purposes. Pastor Jay Mowchenko, the lead researcher, will not be taking part in the interviews to avoid any intimidation or conflict of interest by virtue of his position as Lead Pastor of WFMC.

Follow-up: In the following year, after the research team has analyzed all of the interviews, WFMC will be making changes to respond to concerns that were raised, and expand areas of strength. One year later, we will be contacting you to see if you would be willing to take part in a follow-up interview, so you can help us check to see if what we did made any difference. You are completely

free to decline this interview.

A full report of this study will be written up and initial results will be presented at the WFMC Annual meeting in January 2017, which you are invited to attend.

There will be no expense to you as a consequence of your participation in the study.

The following is the full legal consent form – please read it carefully and then sign the final page in the presence of your interviewer.

Right of Refusal

We recognize that your participation in this study is purely voluntary. You are free to stop your participation in the study at any time, and withhold the right to use any information you have previously revealed from being used or retained for the purposes of the study, without penalties, consequences or withdrawal of church services. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions that you are asked. You, or your legally acceptable representative will be informed in a timely manner if information becomes available that may be relevant to your willingness to continue participation in the study.

It is the commitment of WFMC that there will be no direct response or consequence to you based on any information or opinions that you share with the study team.

Protection of Identity and Confidentiality

It is the intent of this study to publish the results within the church and the Free Methodist Church in Canada, as well as part of the degree requirements of the Tyndale DMIN program. We request your permission to publish the study in this way.

All of your personally identifying information will be confidential to anyone beyond the research team. This means that any identifiers such as name, age, ethnicity, specifics about family structure, or occupation that could be used to discover your identity will be removed from statistics and quotes that would be used in reports, presentations, or any other public distribution that may result from the publication of the study.

Access to the raw interview data will be restricted to the members of the research team and WFMC administrative support staff. It will be stored on a secure computer in the church. The audio files will be destroyed one year after the publication of the study. No information that discloses your identity will be released or published without your consent unless required by law. This legal obligation includes a number of circumstances, such as suspected child abuse and infectious disease, expression of suicidal ideas, where research documents are ordered to be produced by a court of law and where researchers are obliged to report to the appropriate authorities.

We request your permission to use the modified notes, quotes and insights gained from this study in future research, planning and publishing of WFMC activities.

Risks/Benefits

It is our opinion that there is no more risk to you by participating in this study than there is in your normal participation in WFMC programs. However, despite the precautions that are to be taken, should a connection be made between a person and their confidential opinion, there is a very minor risk of some damage to your social relationships.

We hope that this study will benefit participants of this study through an increased satisfaction in their relationship with WFMC, an improved spiritual connection with God through reflection on their spiritual journey, and strengthened relationships with members or WFMC.

Reporting Concerns

If you have any questions or concerns about this form, the study, and /or your participation in it, please contact:

Derrell Rodine, WFMC Board Chair

Or

Kevin Cornish, WFMC Lead Delegate

Pastor Jay Mowchenko, Lead Researcher and Lead Pastor of WFMC

or any of the members of the research team via email at:

Alex Fitzpatrick
Jenna Fitzpatrick
Lisa Mallory
Gwen Wright
Leigh Rosengren
Colleen Christopherson
Patty Clampitt
Carrie Gryde
Grace Alexander
Helen Orsted

You can also check out our YouTube channel for frequently asked questions at:
www.youtube.com/c/JayMowchenko

You may also contact Tyndale Seminary directly at:
Tyndale Research Ethics Review Board or Dr. Mark Chapman
3377 Bayview Ave
Toronto, ON, Canada
M2M 3S4
Phone: 1-416-226-6620 or 1-416-226-6380
Fax: 1-416-226-6746
Email: REB@tyndale.ca

Consent Form

(Please bring this to the interview unsigned. You will need to sign it in the presence of the interviewers to be part of the study.)

I have read this consent form.

I have had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss what is involved.

I understand the risks of taking part in this study.

I understand that my personal information will be kept confidential, and my comments will be made confidential unless by my specific written consent.

I give consent to be interviewed.

I give permission for the audio of the interview to be recorded.

I am willing to take part in a follow up interview approximately one year from now.

I understand that by signing this consent form, I have not waived any of my legal rights.

Participant printed name: _____

Participant signature: _____

Date: _____

**APPENDIX 7: RESEARCH TEAM
CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT**

By signing this form, you acknowledge that in the course of this research you may work with and/or acquire confidential and personal information pertaining to staff, members and adherents of the Weyburn Free Methodist Church and surrounding community. You agree to hold this confidential information in trust and you shall not (except as if mandated by law), at any time, during or following your involvement in this project, use or disclose or make available to anyone for use outside of the research project any of this personal or confidential information, except as defined in the informed consent form for “Beyond First Impressions.” Violation of this confidentiality agreement may be cause for prosecution or legal action.

I agree to be bound by the terms of this document.

Name: _____

Witness: _____

Date: _____

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